THE BIOGRAPHY OF A MILLION DOLLARS

GEORGE
·KIBBE·
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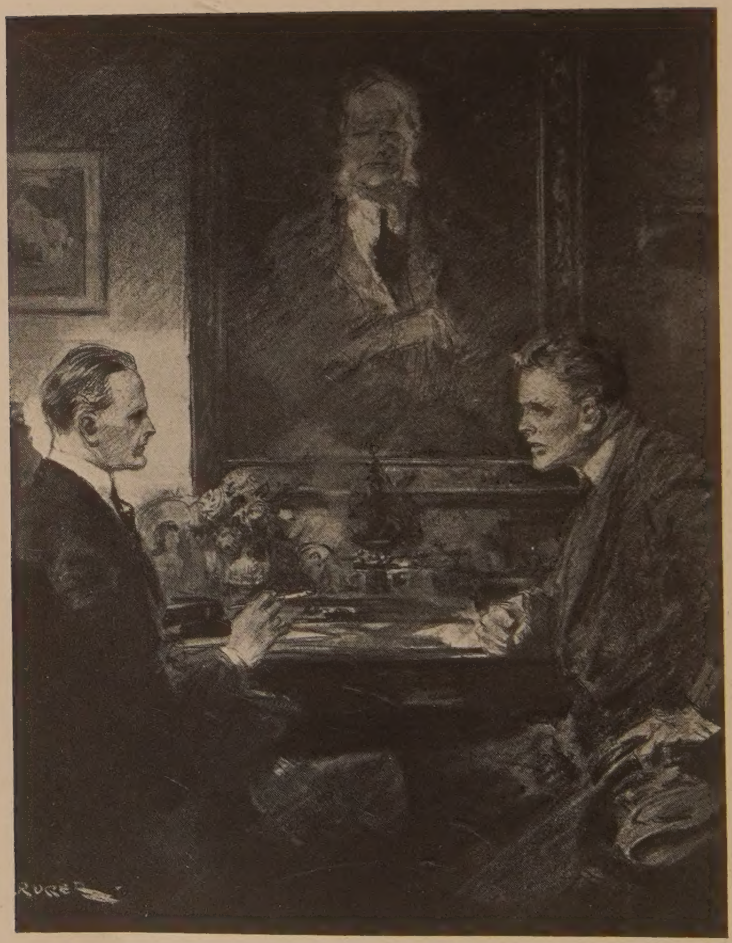

"WHAT DO I LOOK LIKE TO YOU — A MAN THAT WILL DOUBLE-CROSS HIS BEST FRIEND?"

FRONTISPIECE. *See Page* 162.

THE BIOGRAPHY OF A MILLION DOLLARS

BY

GEORGE KIBBE TURNER

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY

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THE BIOGRAPHY OF A MILLION DOLLARS

CHAPTER I

THE MAN WITH THE CARBURETOR

Since Pasc Thomas died last month my mind keeps going back to the time we started in together — that dirty, foggy, February evening he first came into my old bicycle shop on Elm Street in his old butternut colored overcoat.

"Is the boss in?" said he.

"Right here," said I.

"Shut the door, why don't you?" said that Wilkins I had with me then. He was always dodging drafts for fear of catching cold — and he always had one.

So this stranger stepped on in, and shut the fog out after him.

"Well, what can I do for you?" said I, looking him over.

He was a lean, hungry looking man, with eyes like a ghost's. In that old flowing overcoat he looked seven feet tall.

"I got something here I want to show you," he said, and pulled out this small carburetor from his pocket.

You could see from his fingers he was a machinist.

"For motor cycles," he said.

"You get it up yourself?" I asked him.

I'd seen that kind before. We were used to them. They were dropping into the shop all the time: those lean, leather-faced Yankee inventors with absent-minded eyes — coming in showing what they'd gotten up, all kinds of things, the way they do in all machine shops.

"Yes," he said to me.

"Sit down," said I.

"We'll be closing up in half an hour," said Wilkins.

"I won't take up much of your time," said the man, in a quick, sharp voice, fastening those hungry, pale-blue eyes of his on me.

"Sit down," I said to him again; "let's hear what you got."

Anybody's a damned fool, I always claimed, who won't find out what a man like that's got, when all it costs you is to sit still and listen. How can you tell what new idea might drift in?

"What's your name?" I asked him. He looked pretty seedy to me; about all in.

"Thomas — Pascal Thomas," he said.

"Mine's Bill Morgan," said I. "Go ahead."

So he showed me the thing, and I took it up in my hand — that little brass arrangement, no bigger than a teacup — not so big! I often think of it.

"You familiar with them?" he asked, watching me.

"Some. I've been looking into this motor-cycle

business some lately," said I, " thinking there might be a dollar in it."

And I looked the thing over.

" Uh-huh," I said, opening it up. " Well, how does it work in actual practice? "

" First class," he said.

" You tried it out? " I asked him.

" All I need to," said he, and went on explaining its points to me. " I've got several new wrinkles here, you'll see," said he, touching them with his long fingers. Two of them off, I saw, on the left hand.

" Well now," I said finally, " to sum it all up — just what have you got here that the other fellow hasn't? "

" Speed," said he, lifting up those queer pale-blue eyes from the thing a second. " That's what I've got. Speed."

" That's a darned good thing to have these days," said I. And I sat there, looking at the carburetor, in the palm of my hand — the different parts of it. It looked pretty good to me. And yet it was nothing I could do anything with, by itself. But it started me thinking.

" What's the best time they've made with them, up-to-date, on these racing tracks? " I asked him, laying it down. " I forget."

" Motor cycles? "

" Yeah."

" A mile a minute, about — just a few seconds under."

" And what do you claim you could do with this? "

"Two miles."

"Two miles a minute!"

"Almighty near."

"Yes, you can!" said I.

"Look," he said, sitting up and talking straight into my face. "I'll tell you. I won't lie to you. You've brought up a little different thing.

"To begin with," he said, going on, "we'll understand we ain't talking about my carburetor now; we're talking about motor cycles — how you're going to get two miles a minute out of them."

"Yes," said I, watching him.

"Now, then," he said, "I'll tell you,"— and put his hand to his forehead for just a second. Then he reached in and took out something from his vest pocket, and began to chew it. I thought at first it was tobacco, and then I saw it wasn't. It was more white.

"Now," he said, "I'll tell you. In the first place, you understand, I don't claim that it's just my carburetor that'll do all this."

I didn't say anything. I let him talk.

"It's a combination of things," he went on, "that are coming along at this time — that's going to change the whole thing over — make an entirely new motor cycle.

"First of all, there's this carburetor of mine, we'll say. Or some form of multiple jet carburetor."

"To shoot more gas into her," said I.

"At these high speeds in the engines now."

"Two thousand revolutions a minute, ain't it?" said I.

"Yes, and two thousand five hundred."

"I God," I said. "That seems a lot, don't it, when you think of it?"

"They'll go higher," said he. "And then," he went along, "the second thing; there's the magneto, instead of the battery, the way they're doing it abroad in Europe."

"Yes," said I, listening. That man knew his business — you could tell that, just hearing him.

"And then, third," he said. "There's that mechanical intake valve they're bringing in to take the place of that mean contrary old automatic valve they've had.

"Those three are the principal things," he said — and stopped.

"You mean to say," I said, this idea flashing through my head, "they could take these three improvements, and put them on a motor cycle that would make two miles a minute."

"I mean to say," he answered me, "the time's come when you can put all the power on two wheels that they can carry, and not jump clear of the ground altogether."

"If they can," said I, "the man that does it first's got a barrel of money!"

"Going to stay here all night?" asked this Wilkins over my shoulder, breaking in on us.

"If I want to," said I.

I'd seen him getting up and putting on his overcoat and his gum shoes and muffler.

"Well, lock up after you," he said, "I'm going home."

"Go ahead," said I.

But he didn't go; he stood there, mousing around, listening back of my shoulder.

"I'll tell you why," I said, going along, to Pasc. "What they want in this country now is speed. That's the United States of it. We've all of us got to get there — first."

"Correct," said Pasc.

"You know that, as well as I do," said I. "That's what they've got to have. Feet were out of date long ago," said I. "For the last fifteen years we're all going rolling around on wheels."

"Good and sure," said he, watching me, and chewing slowly on whatever it was he had in his mouth.

"I've watched it myself," I said, "ever since I was a boy in the old bicycle days. Long before I got into this business here, like a darned fool — too late."

"Like the most of us," said Pasc, stopping chewing.

"They were the first speed merchants, as the saying goes," said I, "those bicycle manufacturers. The big ones," I said, "before they all split up into little assembling shops like this. They're the fellows that first got us up on to wheels. All the rest of it — all this putting on an engine in those automobiles and motor cycles is just an extension on that original idea, when you come to trace it down."

"That's right," said he.

"Cripes, the money those fellows — those bicycle manufacturers around here — made in those days. Hundreds of thousands — yes, millions every year. Millions," I said, "in ten years. All starting, you might say, from nothing."

"And back again to nothing," said Pasc, with those eyes of his watching me, "when the auto came along and drove them out."

"All speed," I said, "that's all it was. Faster and faster. And the big money in this country in the next ten years is coming just where it did in the last ten, selling speed to them. There's where the money is now. Gold mines are a back number. They've got to have speed, and they've got to have it right away, when they want it."

"We put in an engine fifty per cent. bigger, anyhow," said Pasc, nodding his head, "than they use in Europe, and gear them up accordingly."

"We've got to go faster, and faster every year," said I.

"That's what they want," said he, "and they'll have it."

"I God, yes," said I. "If you could make some machine that would shoot 'em out of a gun, they'd eat it up, and the next best thing to that is a motor cycle."

I could see Wilkins, still standing mousing around back of my shoulder.

"And so I say," I went along, "the man who could start first making them go two miles a minute might have a fortune."

"Who'd want 'em?" said Wilkins, breaking in finally.

"Every eighteen dollar a week kid," said I, "that wants to get out Sundays, and take breakfast in Chicago, and dinner at the South Pole. And come back and put her up in the front hall before tea. Every kid that's got any zip to him. Oh, I know," I said, "I've been there myself."

And I saw Pasc Thomas grin — one of those old, sudden grins, that these sober-faced men like him break out into.

"Haven't you?" I asked him.

"I have," he said, the wrinkles closing in around his mouth again.

"I don't believe there's any money in it," said Wilkins.

"And I know there is," said I flaring up, and saying so anyhow. He always made me sick, pouring cold water on everything. "If you can find the man who could do what this man says they can."

"It can't be done," said Wilkins.

"You can do it," said Pasc Thomas.

"Who can?" I said, studying him. "Do you know anybody?"

"I can," said Pasc Thomas.

"You sure of that?" said I.

"I ought to be," he said. "That's my trade."

"Where you been working?"

"I've been with the Rajah motor cycle people for three years now."

"Are they making any money?" I asked him right away.

"That I don't know," said he flat. "That ain't in my line." You couldn't help liking the man. Nine out of ten in his place would have said they were getting rich there.

"I don't know anything about the financial end," he said, "but I do know that machine, inside out — every nut, and screw and cotter pin in her.

"I got something here," he said, "maybe'll interest you." And he dragged this old envelope out of his inside pocket. "Here's their machine," he said, pointing with an old stub of a lead pencil to a drawing on the back; "and here's how the one would look I'd make with the new improvements on it."

And then he handed it over to me. I couldn't make much out of it then. I didn't take time to.

"Look here," said I, catching fire all at once. "Do you want to take a chance?"

"I don't know," he said. "What?"

"I tell you what I'll do with you," I said to him. "If you'll come here and make up a half a dozen of those machines you've been talking about, we'll put up our machinery and the material against your time, and split the profits.

"What do you say," said I, when he didn't answer right off. "Will you do it? Will you take a chance on your own stuff?"

"Well, yes," he said. And I could see his thin lips tighten up. "I guess maybe I can do it."

"All right then," said I. "That's settled." And I started to get up.

"Who says so?" said this Wilkins from back of me, all at once.

"I say so," said I, turning around and facing him.

"Well, I guess I'll have something to say about that before you do it," said he, putting his hand up to his lips the way he did when he was going to get contrary. "According to our agreement."

"Oh, forget it," I told him. "Go home and sleep it off."

"I mean what I say," he said, standing, looking down at me through his glasses.

"So do I," said I.

"It's all right for you," he kept along. "To take a chance with the first wild thing that comes along."

"You know we've got to do something," I said, coming back at him; "you know that."

"It's all right for you," he said, "but it's my money in here."

"Aw, drop it," I said, "wait till we get alone."

"What do you know about this man, anyhow?" asked Wilkins, making one of those Susified motions of his.

"Don't mind him," I said, turning around to Pasc. "I've got the say-so here."

"Have you?" said Wilkins, his voice getting thinner and higher, and more old womanish every minute; "we'll see whether you have or not."

"Oh, stand still," I said, "and hold your feet down." Two years of him had been about all I could stomach.

"You can't do it," he kept saying, "that's all. You can't do it — without my consent."

"We'll see about that," said I, stepping toward him, "tomorrow. Now, you shut up."

"You can't scare me," he said, backing away.

"Scare *you,*" said I.

"You can't scare me," he said again, with a kind of break in his voice.

"Don't burst into tears," I said. "Don't get your clothes wet."

"You can't scare me," he said, for the third time — his voice way up. "You can't bulldoze me, you big bulldozer, you — you big bully!"

And started blabbing out before that stranger all the things he'd been laying up against me; and all our private affairs — the money he'd put in on my notes.

"Quit it," I told him. "Go on, now; quit."

But he kept right along, like a child that has got started crying and can't stop, turning from Pasc to me and back again.

"I want you to understand," he said to him, "he can't do it. He hasn't got the right. You can't do it," he said to me, "not with my money in here!

"I'll take out my money first, I'll get out. I'm going to have some say in this business, or I'll get out."

"Get out then," said I. "You poor old female mule!"

He stood there, looking at me through his spectacles; with his hair all brushed just so, and his

clean collar and his clean white bookkeeper's hands down by his sides.

"Get out," I said. "Take your three thousand dollars; and your gum shoes, and your mufflers, and your sniffles, and your darned Susie ways — and get!"

"I will," said he.

"Go to the devil," I said.

"You'll see," said Wilkins.

And the office door shut after him.

"I'll be here tomorrow for my money," he said, coming back and opening it part way again, and then stopped and thought a minute. "And I'll give you just two months to bust in," he said.

And then he got out entirely, and left us two standing there.

CHAPTER II

PARTNERS

We stood there — I and this fellow I'd never seen in my life until a half an hour before — facing each other; he looking at me and I looking at him.

I've seen hundreds like him; the machine shops of New England are full of them — still, lean-faced men that don't talk till they're talked to; these long-faced, lantern-jawed fellows, with blue eyes peering out over their shiny cheek bones, that have gone still, working and puzzling around machinery.

He stood there like a stone fence; he had stopped that slow grinding, even, on whatever it was he had in his mouth. His face was still as a board, as we both waited there, listening to Wilkins' footsteps go off along the sidewalk.

"I guess you won't thank me much for coming in here," said he to me finally.

"Why not?" said I.

"Losing your partner."

"Don't let that worry you," I told him. "I was just going to get rid of him anyhow." I wasn't, of course, but I had to say so. "And you kept me from having to do so."

"Well, I didn't know," said Pasc, and his jaws started working again.

"Sure," I said. "I've had my bellyful of him — two years."

"Well, then," he said, and set those hungry eyes of his on me again, "is it going to be all right to go ahead with that thing we were talking about — those motor cycles?"

"Sure thing," said I. "Unless you want to quit."

"Quit?" he answered, talking slow. "Me?" And stopped a minute. I noticed then his lips were kind of apart.

"But I don't want to lie to you," he went on again — talking slower yet, as if it was hard work getting the words out. "I don't want to do anything under false pretenses. I haven't got a dollar that I could put into it myself — I want you to know that on the start."

"You're squarer'n a die," I said to myself, watching him. "They don't make many like you."

I noticed that he was kind of leaning up against the desk.

"Oh, that will be all right," I said out loud.

"All I've got," said he, holding out that carburetor, "is this right here and my shop experience."

"That'll do," said I. "If you make good. If you make good — if this thing works out — we can fix up some sort of partnership in it."

"That'll do, will it?" said he, over again, as if he was kind of tired. "That'll be all right? — For a kind of partnership?" — and made a kind of a grab at his throat.

And, bang! He keeled over on the office floor. And his carburetor rattled out of his hand under the desk.

"Here, what's this?" said I, dropping down on my knees beside him.

It makes me laugh when I think of it — this long, lean fellow in the brown overcoat, looking tougher than an old-fashioned dried codfish, lying there on the floor — keeled over in a dead faint — and me on my knees trying to bring him out of it.

But he came to right away and opened his eyes.

"Here," said I, "what's the matter with you?"

"Oh, nothing," he said, and started trying to get up.

"Lie still," I told him, and slipped the leather seat from the desk chair under his head. And I sat in the chair myself and watched him.

"Cripes, what next?" said I to myself. "This man must be a hoodoo. First he comes in and drives Wilkins out of the door, and then he flops over on the floor — dead on my hands."

"I want to get up," he said, struggling.

"No, you don't," I told him. "Lie still."

So he did, for a while longer.

"Let me have that, will you?" he said, and I handed him back his carburetor from under the desk.

"What struck you?" I asked him finally.

"Oh, nothing," he said, "I don't know. All of a sudden I felt kind of faint."

"What do you want now?" I asked him. I saw he was trying to get something in an inside pocket.

So I opened up his coat for him, and he reached in his hand and brought out what he was after, and broke off a sliver, and started chewing it.

"Have some?" he said, holding it out toward me.

"What is it?"

"Slippery elm," said he. "Go ahead. Have some. I chew it all the time. It's fine for the stomach."

I have to laugh now when I think about it. I suppose he was kind of light-headed and wanted to say something — to pass it off.

"No, I guess not," I said.

I sat there watching him, and all of sudden it struck me what it was that ailed him.

"Look here," I said, "I want you to tell me something."

"What is it?"

"How long since you had your last square meal?"

"Well," he said, "I had a little —"

"No," said I. "I want to know!"

"Well," he told me, "I stopped and took a little something at a lunch cart."

"When?"

"Last night."

"Ah-hah," said I. "What was it? What was it?" I said again before he'd answer me.

"Well," he said, "I guess I had a cup of coffee, and a piece of squash pie."

"Ah-hah," I came back. "Well, I guess I know something that's better for the stomach than chewing slippery elm."

And I went out and got a cup of coffee and some sandwiches at the quick-lunch room around the corner. He was sitting up in a chair when I got back.

"That coffee did me good," he said, wiping his mouth off when he was done; and looked over at me.

"I won't lie to you," he said, "I was just about down and out. That's the facts in the case. I was almighty near starving. I never did anything like that in my life before," he said,—"fainting,"— and stopped a minute.

"At the same time," he said, "I don't want you to get the idea I'm a hobo — or anything like that."

"I don't," said I. "Not for a minute."

"No," he said, "I'm a good workman. I'm a first-class machinist, if I do say so."

"You don't have to tell me that," I told him.

"And up to six months ago I made my $28.00 a week regular. Then I got this bug in my head. I got up this carburetor."

So finally he told me about himself, dragging it out pretty hard, like those close-mouthed ones do.

It seemed he'd married this lively good-looking girl — younger than he was apparently; pretty young and full of life, and anxious to have a good many things. And he thought maybe he could do better than wages, and then he worked out this carburetor. So he sent his wife home to her folks and started out with a couple of hundred dollars trying to get somebody interested in it.

"I wouldn't give it up," he said to me. "I wasn't going to give it up and go back to my wife's mother — not till I had to."

"Naturally not," said I.

"But I almighty near had to," he told me. "I got down to this," he said, and fished out three cents and a green street-car transfer from his overcoat pocket. "This was the last throw," he said, "when I happened by your bicycle shop on this side street. This was the last — when I found somebody who'd listen to me, finally.

"You wouldn't believe me," he said, flaring up a little, "you wouldn't believe me if I told you what a lot of fools I saw in this business, tramping around! Tramping around," he said, "six months, all over, stopping into offices, trying to get some of these apes in white collars that run these big shops to stop just long enough to look at it once. By Almighty!" he said, and stopped, staring.

"By Almighty, you're the first human being I've talked to with sense in the whole bunch — and I'd be grateful to you — if for nothing else — for just listening to me. I don't know but I appreciate it more," he said, pointing to the empty coffee cup, "than that.

"You don't know what it is. You don't know what it is," he went along, "to go day after day, tramping around, without getting anybody that'll take the time to listen to you, give you a fair hearing. It certainly is almighty humiliating. And especially when all the time, you know you've *got* something. You know you've got something," he said, reaching his hand in his pocket on to that carburetor, "that might make them rich — and you too."

And then he stopped short.

"I guess I got a little excited," he said, apologizing, and got up on his feet. "I guess it's time I was going."

"Where'll you go to?" I asked him.

"I don't know exactly."

"I guess you don't," said I, and passed him a couple of dollars.

"How do you know you'll ever see that again?" he said, staring at it.

"I'm not worrying," said I.

"Well," he said — and stopped there, stock-still.

"Come around tomorrow morning," said I, "and start in."

But he didn't move. He stood there with the money in his hands.

"Look here," he said, "what are you getting out of this? What can you be sure of?"

"I'll be getting a share in a damned good carburetor, as I understand it," said I. "And a first-class machinist who knows motor cycles, to get a brand new thing out — on brand new lines. If it goes through," I said, "I win big. If it don't, all I lose is some material and time, and a few weeks' machinist's wages, while you're working on it.

"If that suits you," I said, waiting. But his Adam's apple only went up and down. He didn't say anything.

But finally he put the money in his pocket.

"At seven tomorrow morning," I said.

"Well, all right," he answered, and kind of hesitated, as if there was something else he was going to say.

"All right," he said a second time, and went out without saying anything more.

"Cripes," I said to myself, sitting there when he was gone. "This will be about enough for me for one evening."

For I saw right off what this thing was going to mean to me. That Wilkins and I were through. That poor mule would have his money out now, anyhow. And if he didn't, I'd make him. We hadn't made a dollar the last two years. And we hated each other like the two men who were handcuffed together on the desert island with nothing to eat.

I saw then I'd have to have some money quick. But the question was, where was the money coming from? I couldn't get it at the bank, that was sure — not then; not in the bicycle business. I sat and wrestled with it; and the more I looked, the clearer I saw. There was only one way. I'd got to get Polly to let me put a mortgage on the house. I hated to do it too. I hated to drag her into it — to put up the only thing she had.

"But I don't see," I said, "looking at it the worst way you can, that we'd be any worse off than we are now. The bicycle business would go on just as it was now; and this man's salary won't come to so much as Wilkins' did. And what his material would be wouldn't be much.

"On the other hand," I said, "this may be the

chance of a lifetime — if he could do what he says he can."

And I went over in my mind the figures I'd made before on the motor-cycle business. "There's a barrel of money in it, I believe," I said to myself — "a good big thing for the man who can jump in right now, and jam it. If you could only sell quarter the number of them that we put out of wheels today. Christmas!

"And I believe we can do it," I said to myself. "Start easy, and work it up. I believe it can be done.

"We'll do it, too," I said. "We've got to." And I got up. I heard somebody out in the shop. And I looked up at the clock.

"Good Lord," I said.

It was seven o'clock, and old Tom Powers was coming around, giving the place its first look-over for the night. He'd been night watchman in the building for several years now. A good capable mechanic once, but his right hand was taken off in a belt, so he wasn't any good on a machine any longer. And they gave him this job as night watchman.

"Hello, Tom," said I.

"Hello yourself," said Tom. "What time's this to be getting home? You'll get a good warming when your wife sees you."

"That's right, too," said I.

I always liked the old man. He was a queer old devil. Some of them would tell you he wasn't quite right in his head. He had this invention of

his, the Miracle we used to call it — from something he said once — jollying him; this perpetual motion machine he worked on there nights: A kind of a small model that he had, a queer looking thing, like a little windmill, with arms that folded up and flapped out again when you set it whirling.

I never made out myself whether at the bottom of his heart he took it seriously, or whether it was just something to keep his mind from going loose while he was alone in there nights, with those long still rows of machinery. It must have got pretty lonesome in those empty shops nights, thinking, knowing you had your right hand gone. And I always thought probably he was like a lot of those other fellows that get crippled up in machine shops. They naturally want to make themselves feel they're some use yet, if they are gone physically; and that starts them trying to think out something — some invention. Anyhow, in most ways old Tom was sharp as a briar; and as well posted as anybody. He had so much time to read the papers.

I often asked him what he thought of things, and I thought I'd start him up that night.

"You've got competition, Tom," said I.

"What's that?"

"Another fellow's been in today with another Miracle."

"Another one? That all?"

"Yes," I told him.

"What's this one got? What's he been trying to do?"

And I told him.

"Do you know what I think I'm going to do, Tom?" I said. "I'm going to start him off. I'm going to see if I can't have a crack at the motorcycle business. There might be big money in it — what do you think?"

"What have you got that's new?" he said, looking at me. He was a queer looking old fellow. He had a face thin as an old skeleton, and a kind of big bulging forehead; and cheeks sunk in over his jaw. When he grinned you saw half of his teeth were gone.

"We can make one, so he claims, that'll stand up one hundred per cent. better than they do now."

"Can you!" said Tom.

"And go fifty per cent. faster — anyhow."

"That'll do it," said Tom, looking up. "That's what they're after — sixty — eighty — a hundred miles an hour!"

"Could we sell them — if we could do it?"

"Sell 'em, yes. Every kid'll want one right away. Why wouldn't they? Hop on your own kerosene can and over to Chiny and back in one day; scampering around the world like the devil on a stick. Sure they'll want one!"

"We'd have thought it was a miracle at that," said I, "when we were kids."

"So it is," said he. "So's most everything nowadays. That's the business we're all in — miracles. The only trouble with 'em is they don't last. This one'll be a back number ten years from now, just like the bicycle is today. There's something new coming along all the time."

"You're right," said I. "You got to keep humping to keep up with the procession nowadays."

"I was reading in the paper just this morning," said Tom, "about those Wright boys, down in Dayton, Ohio, starting over to France to show them how to fly in the air."

"Yes, I saw that," said I.

"They was in the bicycle business, you notice, like the rest of us."

"Yes, but that won't go very far," said I. "There's a catch in that thing."

"It'll be the coming thing ten years from now — when your machine will be a back number — and mine," he said — and grinned his old grin like an old skeleton, with half the lower teeth gone. He always joked about his contrivance.

"But there's one thing you got to remember," he said. "By that time we'll both have made our million, and be retired."

"That's right, Tom," said I. "Why wouldn't we make a dollar some day — like the rest of them?"

"That's right, why wouldn't we," said he, with that death's head grin.

"But there's one thing," I said, "you want to remember! I've got an option on some of that stock, when you get the old Miracle on the market."

"You'll have it," said he.

"She's going fine, ain't she," said I. "She's working out all right?"

"She's going good," he said. "I can't complain," with that kind of dry old crafty grin upon his

face he had sometimes. I never could make out whether he was laughing or not.

"She'll start some of these days," he said. "And I'll come around and surprise you."

"You won't surprise me any, Tom," said I, spatting him on the back. The poor old devil!

"Go on now," said Tom. "The wife'll be waiting. Go along. I'll lock up after you."

So I went, and he locked up; and went back again, I suppose, when I was gone, and started pecking away with his old left hand at his little old perpetual motion machine, back alone in the shop. And I went along home, thinking how I'd put the thing — about the mortgage — to Polly.

CHAPTER III

THE MORTGAGE

"The — This is a nice time to be getting home," said Polly, coming to the door with two red spots in her cheeks, and that little hitch in her voice she had when she was mad or excited.

"I know it," said I. "But had a fellow come in just as we were closing up that I had to wait for."

"I guess if you'd tried hard, you could have got rid of him," said Polly, kissing me finally.

"You've got to stop this, Bill," she said. "It turns everything upside down in the house, and you know it."

"I apologize," said I.

"That won't do my dishes for me," said Polly, going out in the kitchen for my supper.

So we didn't talk much while I was eating. Both the kids were in bed; and we sat there alone.

"Who was it," she asked me finally, when she thought I'd had punishment enough. "This man who came in to see you?"

"Oh, a fellow came in," I said, "who had a new idea for a motor cycle."

"Another one of those cranks with frayed cuffs, I suppose," she said, "that come in every week with a fortune."

"Maybe," said I.

And I helped her clear off the table, and went back and sat down and smoked and thought it over while she did the dishes.

"Tell me about it," said Polly, coming back, and sitting on a stool beside me — come around again, good-natured as usual.

So I kissed her, and told her what happened.

"Poor fellow!" she said, staring, and getting red when I told her about his flopping over on the floor. "Why — why didn't you bring him home?"

"Oh, I fixed him out just as well, I guess," I said.

"Did he have anything you could use?" she wanted to know. And I told her about his improvements he had on the motor cycle; and what old Tom had to say about it.

"Well, I always thought myself they were a kind of a miracle," said Polly, "tearing around the way they do. I wish father was here, sometimes, just to hear what he'd say when he saw one. But they are, anyway, that's what I always think, when I see one — just a miracle."

"Well, I hope this one will blossom out," said I, "into a full-fledged one."

"Why?" said Polly.

"Because it'll be our miracle, if it does," I said. "It'll be our own meat."

"What do you mean?" she asked me, sitting up and looking at me over the arm of the chair.

"I've arranged with this fellow that's got the thing to make up one or two for us on trial. And if they turn out right," I said, "we're in on the

ground floor, without any expense to us. It might make a barrel of money for us; it might make us rich."

"I don't see why it shouldn't," said Polly. "Other people have luck.

"I hope so," she went on, patting my hand on the chair arm. "I hope you make all the money there is, Bill. It's about your turn. You've had your share of the other thing these last few years in that old bicycle business."

"There's no money in it any longer," I said for the millionth time. "We got into it too late."

"I know it," said Polly.

"It's about as profitable now as a deserted gold mine," I told her.

"And about as cheerful, you poor old Bill," said Polly, patting my hand again, and laying her face against it. "Especially for a man who's so up and coming, naturally, and anxious to get on as you are.

"I wonder what it would seem like," she said finally, kind of dreaming, "to have all the money you want. I wonder sometimes. I wonder if we'd be any happier with a hundred thousand dollars and a big house than we are right here in this little house on Collins Street."

"I wouldn't mind trying it once," I told her.

"I don't know how *I* could be — much!" she said sighing.

And then we went upstairs.

I didn't say anything more till we were fixed in bed.

"Now, here, Mother," I said then, "I've got something else to tell you. I didn't tell you everything."

"Wh-what is it now?" she came back, her voice sharpening up. "What is it?"

"Wilkins is going to get through."

"What!"

"And take his money out."

"What," she said. "What for? What's he going to do that for?"

So I told her.

"That old pig," she said. "That old disgusting thing. I always did hate him."

"You don't any worse than I do," I said, "nor so much. But that don't get us anywhere."

"I suppose it don't," she said.

"We've got to raise the money for those notes of his."

"How are we going to do it?" she asked, her voice still clearer and higher.

"You tell me," said I.

"Can't you get it at the bank?" she asked me.

"No," I said. "Not any more than that first loan — that thousand dollars I had at the start. If I could, I'd never had Wilkins in the first place. No, there's nothing from the banks — not in the bicycle business, since the slump!"

"What will you do then?"

"I don't know," I said. "Unless you want to let me put a mortgage on the house!"

She was sitting up in bed before I was through saying it.

"Never, never, never," she said. "A mortgage on this house! Never."

And I didn't say anything.

"How could you think of such a thing?" she said. "Father's old place!"

I didn't answer her.

"The only thing we've got sure — for the children," she said, taking hold of my arm. "And when you know how I feel about a mortgage. Anything but that, Bill. Anything but a mortgage! No, sir!"

I kept still.

"I won't do it, Bill! I can't!" she went on. "You know it. It would half kill me. Oh, why don't you say something!" she called out to me, shaking my arm.

"What is there to say?" said I. "If you can't stand for a mortgage, that's all there is to it."

And she kept still now.

"I can go back, I suppose, and lie down in front of Wilkins, if he'll let me!" I said. "I guess he'll have to, for that matter. And we can keep on the way we are now — sliding down hill — year after year — year after year.

"On the other hand," I said, "if I took the bicycle business back myself, I know it pretty well; and if worst came to worst, I believe I could clear myself, and get out whole. And in the meanwhile there's a chance in the other thing — maybe the chance of a lifetime. It isn't impossible," I said. "It isn't as if fortunes hadn't been made time and

time again out of machine shops in things with no more promise in than this."

She sat perfectly rigid. I could just see her, against the wall, sitting up white beside me.

"But that's up to you," I said. "I believe it would be all right. I believe if you wanted to stand for it — in two or three years — if you wanted to come in and stick —"

"If — if I'll stick, Bill. If I'll stick!" said Polly, sitting there like a ramrod. "You say that again, and I'll scratch your eyes out!"

So the next day I handed Wilkins his money.

CHAPTER IV

THE HOODLUM

We made up the first one with our own hands, you might say. All the stationary parts of the engine were cast special. We even bent the tubing on the frame ourselves to be sure and have it right and plenty strong. Then we took her out on Breakneck Hill, and tried her.

"She's good, Pasc," said I, when we came back with her. "She's good."

She took it like a bird.

"I'm glad you like her," said Pasc.

"I certainly do!" said I. "We've got something there, and don't you forget it."

"She does pretty well," he said.

"She's got the power right in her. She's got power enough to tear open any ordinary machine like that Rajah, like you would an envelope."

"That's why I built her so strong," said Pasc.

"She's got the power," I said; "she's got the strength; she's got the reliability. She's a wonder — she's there!"

"I'm glad you think so," said Pasc, chewing faster than usual on his slippery elm.

"That settles it," said I. "We're going to get in back of this thing, and we're going to drive it."

I'd been thinking and figuring day and night on the thing.

"I tell you what I'm going to do," I said. "I'm going to run out the bicycles just as fast as I can; get rid of them, and the bicycle business, and get right after this."

"Ain't you hurrying things a little mite?" said Pasc.

"No," I said. "I know where I can place these bicycles, all right now; and get a little something for the business, and it may be some time before I get another such a chance. There's no risk in that. I'm glad to get out so well. There never will be any money in it. That day's gone by.

"But in this thing," I said, "there's a good big chance. Take it at the worst. If we only sold three hundred of them a year, we'd make a good nice thing out of it.

"No," I said. "I'm doing the right thing, and I'll tell you why — another reason. The man that grabs this thing — these new improvements we've got — has got to go after it hard. It won't be lying around long. There's no real binding patent on it — except maybe on your carburetor."

"I guess maybe you're right," said Pasc.

"I know I am," said I.

So we did; we went right after it, day and night. We hardly took our clothes off to go to bed. We decided to make up six machines to start with. And while I was making up the last of the bicycles, Pasc Thomas was getting the first of the motor cycles for market. We decided finally we'd call her the Hoodlum — just the opposite, you might say, of the Rajah. We thought the name would

strike the young fellows just as well as that did — better. It was Pasc's wife's idea mostly.

We sold this six — first three, and then two and then one more, to young bloods around the town who wanted something special — extra good. And they were good; everybody that saw them said so.

"But all in town," said Pasc. "We don't get any orders from outside."

"That don't worry me," I said. "That will come later. Give them a little time, and they'll advertise themselves. They'll get started. We haven't really tried to push them outside yet. I'm not worrying."

So we went ahead, and made up six more; and after that I had something to worry about!

"This won't do," I said, when we footed up the cost of the things. We weren't making a dollar; we were both working our heads off and not making day wages — turning them out separate, by hand that way.

"I tell you what I can do," said Pasc. "If you let me go ahead and make up forty at a time, I could save you thirty dollars on a machine right there."

"Go ahead and do it," said I.

"Can we?" he asked.

"Yes, I think so," I said. "With what came in from the bicycle business and what credit we can get on material."

Forty was going to be quite a strain for us, I knew that. It meant we had eight thousand dollars pretty near tied up in the things before we got

through. It meant a second mortgage on the house, finally.

"Go ahead," Polly said to me. "I throw up my hands. Go ahead. We might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb."

"You're a good sport, Pol!" I said, when she fixed it up for me.

"I have to be," she said, "living with you."

Way down in the bottom of her heart she was as strong for the thing as I was — talking about it all the time. That was about all we did talk about those days — the Hoodlum. We had it for breakfast, dinner and supper.

"The only thing is," she said, "can you sell it?"

"Sell it," I said. "I certainly can. Why wouldn't I? It can spin circles around anything that's made."

"Those other people with the Rajah have got such a start, that's all," she said.

"You watch me sell it," I said.

But just the same, I didn't. I had no luck with the dealers out of town.

"We don't know it," they said to me. "It may be the best in the world. But it's new, that's all."

Finally the best thing I could do was to put it in with a dozen or more dealers I knew were reliable on consignment. And then they didn't seem to sell — only a few right there at home.

Finally it got along toward August, and it was plain we'd have to do something before long. Our accounts were coming due; and our balances were way down at the bank.

We did our banking, like a good many of the people in the bicycle trade had, with Proctor Billings' bank — the Second National — coming in when his father, old man Billings, was alive.

On the first of August that little bookkeeper, that girl I'd got out of business college, after Wilkins left, came back in the afternoon from the bank, and said:

"The teller said to tell you that Mr. Billings sent word to you he wished you'd fatten up your balance a little bit; it's been pretty low lately."

That didn't sound good to me — the way things were moving. We only had a loan of a thousand dollars there; but we certainly needed that. And I had been figuring and figuring on how I could get it up in the fall. And now I was afraid he might close down on us entirely.

"Couldn't you go to Proctor Billings," said Pasc, "and show him how you're fixed. Tell him what the prospects are, when we once get started."

"Show him," I said. "That's the last thing I'd do! Proctor Billings! That tailormade dude. He'd close on you, as quick as he'd close his hand. Go to him! That's what the old bicycle manufacturers did to his father. And you know what happened to them."

"I've heard more or less," said Pasc.

"He cleaned them out, that's all," said I. "He ruined them. They always claimed they'd have pulled through, if he hadn't started the thing. And he'd done their banking for years, for ten years — and made himself rich out of it. But he jumped on

them first when the time came. He got his money; and he was about the only one who did.

"That's the danger in this thing, Pasc," I said; "what we're up against all the time. I wish a thousand times it wasn't; I wish there was some way you could just go ahead and make a good thing and sell it — and not spend three quarters of your time figuring, figuring how you're going to get money to do it with. Money — that's always the trouble. And especially when you're doing business with people like that Billings crowd.

"Oh, I know them," I said, "father and son — I've watched them for years. And they're as like as the Indians on two copper cents. Only this one now wears more expensive clothes, and has more college educated manners. But underneath, neither one of them ever had any more bowels than a file.

"But don't fret, Pasc," said I. "Everything's been running against us so far; but there's got to come a change pretty quick. Sooner or later something's got to break in our favor. It can't run against you all the time."

I counted, of course, on some sales coming in from somewhere. But they didn't. Instead of that, right away that next week, the machines began coming back from the dealers entirely — first one and then another.

"Three came in today," Pasc told me one night.

"Three!" said I, and jumped on a train to New York to find out what was the trouble.

"We can't sell them, that's all," said this dealer. He was a good friend of mine.

"Why not?" I asked him.

"Well, they're new for one thing."

"So's everything — once," said I. "That's no reason."

"Well, if you want the truth — way down underneath," he said, "I can give it to you."

"Go ahead," said I.

"But if it got back to me, you understand — that you got it here — it would kill me, as far as the motor-cycle business is concerned."

"I understand," I told him. "What is it?"

"It's the Rajah people," he said. "They're knocking you to beat the band — that's the trouble. They're got everybody scared. They say your things look good, but they won't stand up."

"Oh, they do, do they?" said I.

"Yes, all those changes in the machine, and especially those new mechanical valves."

"So they're looking for a fight, are they?" said I, getting hot. "Well, they've come to the right place for it — if that's what they want — or anybody else. We can accommodate them."

"Don't start eating *me,*" he said. "That won't get you anywhere."

"No," said I. "It's somebody else I'm going to eat — not you. And I'm much obliged to you."

And I started back home again — figuring it out on the train.

"There's just one thing to it," said I to Pasc. "We've got to fight."

"How?" said he.

"We're going down there to Newark on Labor

Day," I said, "and show that Rajah crowd up, and that piece of junk they've got!"

"You mean to say," he said, "you're going into racing?"

"That's what I mean."

"Look here," he said. "How are you going to do that?"

"I can do it," said I.

"That costs money, going into that racing game," said Pasc.

"I understand that," I told him.

"Where'll you get it? Who's going to back you?"

"We won't have to be backed," I said —"not to any great extent, and I'll show you why. We've got the machine. We know that, don't we?"

"Yeh," said Pasc, with those queer blue eyes of his on me.

"We can cut figure eights around that piece of junk of theirs."

"Good and sure," said Pasc.

"All we need is somebody that's got nerve — that can hang on to her and let her go."

"When you've said that," said Pasc, watching me, "you've said a good deal."

"I know that," I answered him, "I know we've got to take a man who's had some experience."

"You bet you have."

"But if he had that — and the Hoodlum under him, and plenty of nerve —"

"Who is it you've got in mind?" he asked me.

"You know that little red-headed boy of Tom's," I asked him. "That little Chuck Powers?"

"Uh-huh."

"That's the one. He's ridden quite a lot — in quite a number of these races around the country, and he's got nerve to burn."

"Will he do it?" said Pasc. "Will he take the chance?"

"He'll do it," I said, "I know the boy. He'll jump at it."

"Well, do we want him to, ourselves," said Pasc, stopping his everlasting chewing of his slippery elm. "Do we want to take the chance of having him?"

"Why not?"

"Well, we wouldn't want to be responsible for killing him."

"Killing him!" said I.

"You never saw those devils — those real professionals," said Pasc, "riding a real race, for blood, in one of those new motordromes — those Bowls."

"They do have some bad accidents on them; I know that," said I.

"When something goes — or they shoot off the edge of the Bowl — it's liable to be sure death. They kill a plenty of them in a season — going at those speeds."

"Well," said I finally. "We've all got to take our chances in life, that's certain. If I get him, will you do it, will you get out with him, and help him, and train him up on the fine points of the machine?"

"I'll try it," said he. "But it will be a kind of an experiment, from his standpoint or ours — whether we'll get anywheres with it."

"We've got to, that's all. It's that or nothing now — with us. If we don't, we bust — by the first of October, anyhow, when those accounts come due and that note at Billings' bank."

"But look here," said Pasc. "How are you going to do it anyway?"

"He won't cost anything, nor the machines, nor you — nothing but expenses."

"What are you going to do about the boy?" Pasc wanted to know.

"I'm going to him and tell him we'll put our machine and expenses against his time; and if he makes good, we'll make it up to him, and more later. He'll jump at it! I know it!"

"Maybe," said Pasc. "But even so," he said, bringing out his old envelope and pencil stub, the way he did when he was figuring or working on his mechanical ideas. "Even at that, where'll we get the money?"

"We'll get it," I said.

"Do you realize where we stand?" he said to me. "What our bank balance is? I don't think you do."

"Why not?" said I.

"While you were gone," he said, "this thing came up. Myrtle came in when she found out and told me about it."

"What's she done now?" said I. He was talking about that little bookkeeper we got from busi-

ness school. She was always in trouble with something.

"She sent out for me in the shop," said Pasc, kind of slow, "when she found out."

"What is it?" said I.

"It seems she made a little mistake in her addition. We haven't got so much in the bank as we thought for."

"How much have we got?" said I.

And he told me.

I jumped up on my feet, and cut loose.

"Seven thousand devils," I said. "How'd she make that mistake?"

"I don't know," said Pasc. "Kind of worn down and tired, I guess."

"Did you fire her?" I said.

"No."

"Well, I will tomorrow," I said.

"No, you won't," he said, "when you think it over. She's nothing but a kid — and she's tired out, that's all."

"That won't help us any," I said, "when she makes some great big blunder."

"We're all tired some," he said, "around here, nowadays."

"She never will catch up," said I. "She's always behindhand. She isn't fit for it anyhow. She hasn't got blood enough in her body to keep a mouse alive."

"Besides," said Pasc, "what do you expect? What else can you get anywhere for eight dollars a week?"

"Ah-hah," I said. "Well, we'll see." He didn't convince me then; I meant to let her go anyhow. I only wish I had.

"But the question is," said Pasc, "how are we going to do it, anyhow? How are we going to get the money for racing — or even for our rent and our payroll?"

"We might sell a machine or two more than we expected."

"I've counted on more now than we'll sell," said Pasc, looking at his old envelope.

"We can do it, somehow," said I.

"You'll have to have several hundred dollars anyhow."

"We can do it."

"How?"

"I don't know how, but we'll do it," I said. "I know that. Because we've got to. We're like that bulldog that climbed the tree. And we'll sit right down here now, and figure it out."

"Jerusalem," said Pasc, looking up at the clock. "See what time it is."

It was a quarter past seven.

"Zetta'll snatch me baldheaded," he said, jumping up.

I knew there was no use of talking now; that was one thing you never could move him on — anything where his wife was concerned. Besides, I could see myself there was no use of going ahead then before supper.

"I tell you what you do," said I. "You come right over to the house after you've eaten."

"Shall I bring Zetta with me?" asked Pasc. "She gets almighty lonesome sitting there alone in that flat."

"Sure," I told him. "Bring her along. The women can amuse themselves while we talk business."

And then he rushed out.

Old Tom Powers got in before I got out myself, and I asked him about his boy.

"He won't get much out of it first," I said. "But if he wins out, he won't lose anything by it in the long run. You know me well enough to know that anyway, Tom," said I.

"He'll do it, I guess," said old Tom, talking a little slow. "He's crazy about the riding, and he knows every nut and bolt in that machine of yours. He'd ought to," he said. "He was brought up inside a machine shop. His mother weaned him on machine oil."

And he showed his gums in that old lean graveyard grin of his.

"You haven't got any objections, have you?" I asked the old man — in spite of myself, seeing that old right-hand stump of his. The boy was the only child they had.

"His mother won't like it very much, I suppose," he said. "He ain't only eighteen, and he's the only boy she's got. She thinks it's worse than it is, too."

"Yes, I know."

"But he's got to take his chance," he said, "along with the rest of us. Women always think the worst of everything.

"Go on now," he said, stopping talking about it, kind of suddenly. "Go on. I'll lock up after you. Don't you ever go home to your wife in season?"

So I left him as usual, poking around in the dark, closing up the place after me.

CHAPTER V

ZETTA'S RING

She was a kind of a dark-looking woman — Pasc's wife — a fine, full figure of a young woman, with black hair and red lips. I had only seen her once or twice, when she'd come into the office. She hadn't come to town until just lately; and when she did, they didn't live near us; they'd gone way over to the other end of town, where they were putting up those new eighteen dollar a month flats.

"Hello," she said, coming into the door. "Hello, Mr. Morgan. Howdy do, again. And this is Mrs. Morgan, isn't it? Howdy."

"I'm ashamed of myself," said Polly, taking off her wrap for her, "for not coming over and seeing you."

"Oh, don't mention it," she said. "With your kids and doing your own work at the same time, I know just how it must be. If I was you I'd be dead."

And she went over and took a chair and started talking along to Polly.

"We'll let the men alone," she said, "to take care of their own troubles."

She was smart as a steel trap, you could see that; just brimful of life.

"Our sitting room's pretty small," said Polly.

" I'd take you upstairs, only the children are asleep there."

" Oh, this is all right," said Pasc's wife. " We can sit over here and talk, and not disturb them a particle.

" You go ahead now, boys," she said to us. " You talk your business, and we'll sit over here and get acquainted."

You couldn't help liking her; she was so kind of free and easy, and friendly. She started right along talking to my wife.

" It is kind of lonely," she said, " at first — not knowing anybody in town. And more so with us. I always did like to go, I'm that kind; and Pasc there is just the opposite. That's the trouble with us."

" I guess you don't fight much," said Polly.

" No, we don't fight," she answered her, looking at Pasc, and smiling. They were a queer couple — entirely different from one another. But you could see they thought the world of each other, especially Pasc. Every time she looked at him, his lean old leathery face lighted up like a jack lantern.

I was out getting a cigar for Pasc, from the sideboard in the dining room.

" I always want to go too much," I heard her going on to my wife. " I was brought up that way. An only kid, kind of spoiled. But he wants to come home and sit there nights, thinking out something in his head. For the last two years it's been this carburetor. He's got carburetor on the brain. It was pretty fierce sometimes, especially for a bride. I used to get mad and call him my human carbu-

retor, sometimes, didn't I, Pasc?" she called over to him.

And he grinned that sudden dry grin of his, like those still fellows do — their teeth opening up suddenly out of their stiff faces.

"Just to show him I'm living," she said, "I have to get up, and kick over the traces now and then. But I know; I'm not a fool about it. I know I can't quarrel with my bread and butter. And especially now when we're all going to make so much money on the Hoodlum.

"Now, you go ahead, boys," she called over to us, across the room. "Stop your listening and get down to business."

"All right, Sister," said I, and we went ahead. I felt as if I'd always known her, all my life.

"Now here," I said to Pasc. "Let's get right down, and find out just what we can do. Let's figure out just what we can hope to lay our hands on."

And Pasc brought out his old pencil stub, and another old envelope — half covered up with drawings and figures.

"Now in the first place," I said, "here's one place we can cut down some. We can get rid of this one man."

"I hate to do that,' said Pasc. "He's been a pretty good man for us."

"I know that," I said. "But we've got to do it. We can make it up to him sometime later."

"But you can't cut out much, that's certain."

"Not and run," said I. "Unless you and I stay there twenty-four hours a day."

"You'd better take your beds down and sleep there," Polly called across the room.

You could see they were both listening to us while they talked. They had to more or less; the room was so small.

"Never mind," I called back to her, "you keep out of this, now!"

We couldn't cut out much that we hadn't already — try all we could. I could hear the women going on with their talking, as we sat thinking about it.

They were talking about housekeeping, and the trouble of getting along on what they had. And what they'd do if they had money.

"What I object to is the smallness of it," I heard Zetta — Pasc's wife — say, "being cooped up so when you're poor."

"Now, here," I said to Pasc, "let's get back to the main thing. Let's see what we can hope to lay our hands on. There's one or two other men," I said, "I believe I might sell to, if I shaved the price a little."

"Yes, I know," said Pasc, wetting his little pencil with his tongue. "But even so, you've got to have several hundred dollars yet — to pull out anyway. Isn't that so?"

"Yes, that's right," I had to admit.

"I'm afraid we're kind of up against it," he said.

"Not on your life," I said, and I sat there at one side of the center table, figuring on it.

I could hear the women. They were talking about money still, what they'd do if they had it — like a couple of kids. I had to grin.

"If you had a lot of money what would you do with it?" Zetta was asking.

"I don't know," said Polly.

"I do. I'd live," said the other one. "And we'll have it too — out of this last thing — I know it. And when it comes I'm going to have one grand large time."

I had to grin to myself. We were sitting, figuring our heads off to see where we were coming out, and she was spending our money for us already.

The worst of it was we didn't get anywhere; there wasn't any loophole apparently.

"We were funny folks that way at my home," I heard Pasc's wife going on, "about money. Sometimes we had a lot; and sometimes we didn't. My father was in the livery stable business; and he used to go around to these big races, and bet quite a little, and he was pretty smart at it, too; but sometimes he'd get caught!

"But when we had it, we had it. We didn't keep it long. I was the only child; and he used to give me everything there was, when he had the money. I used to go everywhere; and do everything, about, that he did. We used to have the finest horses in town; and he let me drive them all the time — when I wasn't more than ten years old. And I could drive some. I'd like to see a horse that would go too fast for me — or anything else!" she said. "That's why I've been so much excited over this Hoodlum. I'd like nothing better," she said, "than to dress up like a man, and take one of those things and ride and ride and ride!"

She'd got kind of excited talking about it; and the color had come up under her dark cheeks — shining through the skin. She certainly was a stunning looking woman those days.

"I'm like my father, I guess, more ways than one," she said. "We both had to be going fast, all the time. He gave me this," she said, breaking off, and taking a big diamond ring off her finger. I hadn't seen it before. "On my eighteenth birthday. Before he died. Don't you love them? I do. I think they're wonderful. I'm going to have a bushel of them, when this Hoodlum makes good — when we get all this money we're going to."

"I do," said Polly. "I like them pretty well. Only I never had one yet — not a real one."

"I always thought the world of this one. Isn't it a dandy?" she said, turning it so the light struck it.

"Isn't it a lovely one?" said Polly.

I looked over and saw it. It was a great big fine stone. It made me kind of sore. She sitting there showing the light on that diamond, and we sitting over across the room — figuring, figuring. Figuring and not getting anywhere; with all our assets tied up in those thirty or thirty-five motor cycles.

"I give it up," said Pasc finally, looking up from his old envelope.

"Well, I don't," said I, and kept along.

I saw Polly flush when he said it, and knew she was listening in all the time.

"I never was much good at figures," said Pasc, stopping and waiting for me.

But I didn't get anywhere either.

"You're up against it, too, ain't you," he said to me finally.

"Well, I don't see just now where the money's coming from."

"Well, then," said Pasc. "Will you want to go ahead with it?"

"I sure will," said I.

"You don't want to start and spend our money for something you can't finish, do you?"

"No. But you don't want to bust either, do you?" I said to him.

I thought I was talking pretty low still, but I guess I wasn't.

"No," he said.

"Well, we will!" I said. "Unless we find the money to put this thing through."

He didn't say anything.

"We'll bust, that's the English of it," I went along.

"Excuse me," I heard Pasc's wife saying to mine. I had noticed their talk had slackened up the past minute or two. "Excuse me, Mrs. Morgan," she said, "but I've got to get into this thing the men are talking about."

When I looked at her, I saw her face was red as fire.

"What do you mean?" she said to me. "Did you say you'd bust, if you didn't have more money to run off that race with?"

"Well, that's about the size of it."

"Do you mean to say," she said, turning to Pasc, "things have got as bad as that, and you never told me?"

And those black eyes looked clear through him. "Why didn't you?" she wanted to know. "Why not?"

"I didn't want to bother you," Pasc told her.

"Bother me," she said, in a sharp voice, "I wish you'd bother me more sometimes!"

And we all sat there for a few minutes — feeling awkward.

"You must have thought I was a nice one," she said to me; "fooling around, and talking about money, and showing off my diamond."

"I didn't think anything about it."

"Look here," she said to me, "would three hundred dollars be any use?"

"It might be," I said. "A good deal."

"Here," she said, "take it."

And in a quarter of a second, she had that ring off her finger.

"Take it," I said, flabbergasted. "What?"

"This ring," she told me. "It's worth three hundred dollars."

"Not on your life," said I.

"Your father's ring!" said Polly.

"Yes, you will!" said Pasc's wife.

"Not and take any chance like this with it," I told her.

"Didn't you tell me," she asked, "that three

hundred dollars might pull you through? Save you?"

"It might. Yes."

"And haven't you put in everything you own — a mortgage on your house, and everything?"

"Yes," said I.

"Then what do you take me for? No, sir," she said to Polly, who started to reason with her about this ring from her dead father. "No," she said, standing very straight and still. "We're partners in this thing, aren't we? Then you've got to take it.

"What do you think I am — you putting up your house and all that, and I sitting here with this thing? You take it now, before I get mad. If you don't, Pasc will. Isn't that right, Pasc?"

"Darned sure," said Pasc.

"No, sir," said I again. "I refuse to take it."

"All right," she said, quicker than a flash — and she handed the ring over to Pasc. "I tell you what I'm going to do then."

"What?" said Pasc, grinning at her the way you do at a nice lively child.

"Will three hundred dollars pay for the expenses of this race — everything?"

"It ought to," said Pasc.

"Then it'll be my race," she said. "I'll pay for it. You go ahead, boys, you run your race; and I'll pay for it. And you'll see it's done," she said to Pasc.

"You can count on that," said Pasc.

"But you don't take any risks of losing it," said

I. "You could pawn it, if you like, but you've got to fix it so we're both responsible for getting it back to you."

"You've got to have it, anyhow," she said, "whether you lose it or not."

So we compromised, finally. Pasc took it and put it in his pocket before she would be satisfied.

"You needn't think," she said to me, "that you men are the only ones that ever take a chance in your life."

She looked great — flushed up that way, but her upper lip sat down on the lower one, straight as a die.

"There's a woman," I said to myself then, "that'll go a long ways for what she's after."

She started smiling then, showing her big white teeth — when she had her own way.

"You'll pay me for this," she said,—"don't you worry — when we win out; when the Hoodlum gets going right. Because we're going to win — don't you forget that: this race, and everything we're after."

"That's the way to talk," I told her. "I always did like a woman with some spunk and go to her."

"Well, we've both got 'em, I guess," said Pasc, looking at our wives.

"I God, yes," I said. "That's one satisfaction. You bet we're going to win," I said to her.

"And right after that I'm going to collect on you both,' she said, and started to laugh again.

"You can go the limit with me," I told her.

"I wish half the time," she said, "I was a man, anyhow."

"Pase don't," said I, "and I don't blame him."

"I do, just the same," she said. "You can go somewhere and do something. You aren't cooped up all your life, like a woman — never able to get out, and get what you want most."

"What's that," I said, jollying her.

"Just what you do."

"What?"

"Money," she said. "Without it, where are you? With it you can cut loose and be free. Heavens," she said, and threw up her arms above her head. "You can live.

"You watch me," she went on, "when we get the money. I'll have diamonds galore,— and automobiles, and some real clothes, once. I'll go to New York, and get some clothes that'll make these country frumps around here sit up and take notice."

"You bet you will, and I'll see you get them, if he won't give them to you," I said to her, jollying her again. She was considerably younger than any of the rest of us.

"And now we're going," she said, getting up.

And then they went on home. I noticed Polly didn't have much to say, when they'd gone.

"She's a stunner, isn't she," said I. "I don't know when I've seen a handsomer woman."

"Yes," said Polly, without any spirit in it.

"Like one of these red birds you see sometimes on the top of a tree, in the country. You can't keep your eyes off her. Don't you think so?"

"She is striking looking," said Polly. "But she uses kind of funny grammar; and she dresses pretty kind of conspicuous."

"She can stand it," I said.

"Yes, she can — in a way."

"What's the matter with her?" I said. Polly was always pretty nice about other women. "Don't you like her?"

"Yes," said Polly, "she's a kind of a lawless thing. But I like her — very much."

"Then what is it?" I said, "that you've got against her?"

"Nothing."

"What is it," I said, keeping after her. "Are you jealous of her? It's something; I know that!"

"Nothing in the world," she said, "not against her."

"Against who, then?" said I, still trying to worm it out of her.

"Against myself," she said finally.

"Against yourself?"

"Oh, why didn't *I* think of that!" said Polly, letting it loose; flushing up to the roots of her hair.

"Think of what," I said, wondering.

"What she did — that diamond ring."

"Diamond ring," I said. "You haven't got any diamond ring."

"But I've got other things," she said. "All that old jewelry of mother's. That is quite valuable."

"What do you want to do," I said, "give us

that!" I had to laugh to her, standing there all flushed up.

"I guess you've done about enough, girl," I said, kissing her. "You've put up about all you own. I guess we've all got about enough up to put on one bicycle race. You can keep your mother's jewelry.

"But let me tell you something," I said, thinking: "if this thing works out you'll see some race. If that boy of Tom's can stick on the old Hoodlum, we'll show up that Rajah thing. We'll show them what a real motor cycle is."

"I — I bet we will," said Polly.

CHAPTER VI

THE BOWL

"Now here," said I to Pasc down at the shop the next day, standing there beside one of those old original first model Hoodlums, "what could she do, if she had to?"

"On the straightaway?"

"Yeah."

"Two miles a minute."

"You say so," said I. "But you and I'll never live to see any two miles a minute on wheels."

"She could," said Pasc again, "if there was anybody living dared put her to it."

"And what about that other thing — the Rajah?"

"A mile in fifty seconds. Not more. Not for any length of time. It would bang her up too much. This old girl," said he, "of ours has got easy fifteen seconds over that Rajah machine in the mile."

"Do you believe it?" said I.

"I know it," said Pasc. "Just the same as I know she won't make anywhere near her time at Newark. In one of those condemned Bowls — against that Shang, the Murderer — that Murphy — and that other Rajah bunch."

"I suppose they are the devil," said I.

"You'd think so," said Pasc.

"Well, it's up to you. That's your job," said I. "When are you going to take young Chuck Powers, and start him getting used to it down there?"

"I think I'll start tomorrow," said Pasc. "I've arranged for getting the money on Zetta's ring."

I had letters from him, then, telling me how they were getting on; and what their plans were.

"We've got it all figured out," Pasc wrote me. "We're going to run a new style race. We're out to show that Rajah machine up. And so as to do that good, we're going to start dragging them out from the first; till we pull the insides right out of her. You'll see some records going; and now and then a chunk of hot metal out of that Rajah engine, following us around — unless they manage to foul us out of it."

I heard from them, rather encouraged, several times. But I didn't go down there myself till the day before the race — the day before Labor Day. I couldn't afford it — and I was too busy.

"Well, how's it coming?" I said to Chuck — meeting him first, and shaking hands outside the dressing room.

"Oh, all right, I guess," he said, looking up a second, and down again — the way that kind does; not very talkative. He had a kind of bold, obstinate pair of eyes, when he did look at you — blue, with the whites showing underneath.

"Won your heat, I hear," said I.

"Uh-huh."

"That's good."

"You'll find Mr. Thomas inside," he said, going along.

"What's he done, anyhow, in practice?" I asked Pasc, when he told me about the preliminaries.

"Forty-three seconds for the mile."

"Yes, he has!" said I.

"He can do better," said Pasc, "if he's left alone. The trouble is the Rajah people know it just as well as we do now. They know they've got to do something extra. That Shang Murphy's after him, already. He started out to pick a fight with him yesterday, when he was just standing there."

"He did, huh?" said I.

"That's their old game. Scare the hearts out of the new ones before they even get in."

"Did it work," I asked him, "with our kid?"

"Work!" said Pasc, smiling that dry old leathery smile. "You watch them."

And then we walked around and he showed me this Bowl, where they rode. It was a queer looking thing, 'round and 'round — six laps to the mile, as I remember it. A board track, banked straight up, until it looked just like the inside of a bowl. The riders started and ran 'round and 'round inside them, as the fellow said, like a scared mouse in a soup tureen — hanging up on the sides against the force of gravity.

"The only trouble is," said Pasc, "they ain't banked enough."

"Not banked enough!" I said.

"Not yet. You've got to have them so they

hang right out in the air, when they're riding; as it is now they keep sliding off over the edge, and killing themselves.

"Especially passing somebody else," said Pasc, "at these speeds now. Just a twitch of the wrist, and off you go. The condemned things are only thirty-five or forty feet wide. And you can imagine how long it takes to shoot that."

"They have killed quite a few lately, haven't they?" said I.

"They're nothing more'n death traps," said Pasc, "the whole of them. Some day they'll have to do away with them entirely." And they did, of course, after that. "It takes a man with a case-hardened nerve," he said, "to get into it now."

"Well," I said to him, "how is it? How'll this kid of ours stand it?"

"All right," said Pasc.

"He must be pretty small, next to the rest of them."

"That's all right," he came back. "It ain't size that counts in this, and I don't except that great foul-mouthed murdering freak — that Shang Murphy.

"We're going right after them," said Pasc, "we're going to draw them out from the start, just the same as I wrote you."

"Go ahead," said I. "I'm ready for you. The minute we win, the advertising's all ready to smear up on the walls where the crowd goes out. And if we don't win," said I, trying to be funnier than I felt, "I guess I've got the car-fare home.

But it'll have to come out of the creditors, at that."

I sat there waiting in the grand stand that next afternoon, and watched the crowd, and the riders starting to come over into that Bowl underneath. I was away over at one end of the grand stand, the only seat I could get in the front row. Pasc was down with Chuck Powers in that center of the track — the pit, they called it; so I sat there alone, and shoved my jack-knife blade into the seat as far as I could shove, and drew it out, and shoved it in again — wondering just what was going to happen to us that next hour and a half in that 100-mile race. If we didn't get it, of course we were through.

There was a man next to me — a small, black-looking young fellow — with a big checked cap, and bright yellow shoes, and a bright blue necktie. He looked like he might be one of these young Italians, or a French Canadian. His big cap was down over his eyes, and he sat there chewing gum.

"Queer looking things, ain't they?" I said to him, thinking it would help pass the time to talk to somebody. "These Bowls."

"Sure," he said, looking straight out ahead.

"Treacherous damned things, too — ain't they?" I went along. "I see where they killed another man over in Revere last week — that Joe Lavoisier."

I noticed him then give this little kind of a twitch.

"You see about that?" I asked him.

"Yeah, I saw it," he said, and pulled his cap down more over his eyes.

"Dangerous business," said I.

"They call it racing," he answered after a minute. "Its right name is murder — the way they run it now."

"Shooting off over the edge?"

"Or being pushed."

"Crowded off?" said I.

"You've said it," said this fellow next to me.

"That would be murder!"

"What was I telling you?" he said to me, and shut up. And we both sat there, staring at the track. Some more of the riders were coming on. He stopped chewing his gum, and sat there staring down. He seemed as if he was looking for somebody.

I heard him cursing then, after a minute or two, under his breath. I turned around, and looked at him, and he saw me doing it.

"You were speaking about that Joe Lavoisier," he said, "getting his last week."

"Uh-huh."

"Well, that's the fellow that gave it to him," he said, nodding his big cap.

"Who?" said I, "that big black-looking one?"

I had been watching him before, suspecting already who it was.

He nodded his head again.

"Who is it?" I asked him.

"That's Shang Murphy."

"So that's the man."

"That's the guy. That's the main murderer," he said. "That's the fellow that gave it to Joe."

"Cripes," I said, "he don't hardly look human, does he?"

He didn't — in that leather suit; gawking around. He looked about eight feet tall, and about as big around as a napkin ring.

"He ain't," said the fellow next to me. "He's a damned murdering rattlesnake."

I sat there watching him, thinking about all I had heard about him. I noticed, after a while, how this man beside me kept cursing him out. I didn't pay so much attention at first. I was watching Chuck Powers down there, getting ready with his machine, looking like a two-year-old kid next to that big freak.

But then I heard this fellow next to me — cursing and swearing as if he was talking to somebody — in a kind of a hoarse low voice. And I followed his eyes, and he was talking to that great freak, that Murphy, as if he was alone in a room with him.

"You think you're the only one," he was saying under his breath, "that can pull that murder stuff. But some one's coming along, some day, and hand you yours. And when they do, all I ask is I'll be there to see it — you ——" And he cursed him, in that hoarse low voice of his till your hair rose up on the nape of your neck like a dog's, listening to him.

Finally I caught his eye; he saw I was listening.

"Say, what have you got against him, so much?" I said to him.

"Oh, nothing much," he said, giving me a stare. "Only I'm Joe Lavoisier's brother." And he

pulled down his cap again. "I was there when this thing killed him."

"O, that's it!" said I, catching it finally.

And then we both shut up and looked down at them, getting ready to start the riders on the wheels, each one of us thinking his own thoughts.

"But one thing, by Cripes," I said, looking down at that long leather thing underneath us, and starting talking to him under my breath myself. "If you start any of your murdering stunts this time — on that boy of ours — it'll be your last one. There'll be three hospitals full of you just as soon as I get near enough to you to get one hand around that turkey neck of yours."

And the two of us sat there glaring at him.

"There they get up," said Joe Lavoisier's brother.

And they started the machines off around the track, four of them circling for the flying start, each one at a different quarter of the Bowl.

"Here's where you see it," said he, "the only place on the stand. Out here away from the judges, where you can watch them having it out alone, among themselves."

"Uh-huh," said I, watching them. They didn't look like anything human, for a fact, any of them — in those round helmets, and leather clothes they put on them to protect them from the fire of the exhausts, and the splinters from the board tracks, if they got spilled. A flock of earless, hairless, goggle-eyed leather devils, tearing off on wheels.

"Bang," went the pistol.

"There they go off," said the fellow side of me. And they flung themselves up on the side of the Bowl, whirling faster and faster.

"Some pace," said Joe Lavoisier's brother, taking out a stop watch. "This one is for blood."

"Fifty-five seconds to the mile already," he said after a little while, studying his watch.

Every three or four seconds one went snorting by. I could hear the old Hoodlum come a-roaring all the way around the track. She had an entirely different sound to her. She was walking right up on the man ahead of her — one of those two Rajah riders.

"Look at her go up," I said, half out loud.

"That's that new machine, with the young kid on it," said this Joe Lavoisier's brother.

"Uh-huh."

"You'd know that. You'd know it was some fool kid," he said.

"Why would you?"

"Hitting it up like that. She can't stand it. Nothing can. Nor he either."

"You watch him," said I.

"Yeah? Well, you watch what old Pegleg Hansen does to him,— the one ahead on that Rajah there, when he gets up to him. He's got a nerve, anyhow — a fool kid like that butting in on a race like this, against old birds like these two. They oughtn't to let them. There ought to be a law against it."

But Chuck kept right after his man, while he was talking.

Across the track the same thing, almost, was going on. This Shang Murphy was running up — up — up — on the man ahead of him.

"Shang — Shang — Shang," the grand stand was yelling; that Rajah crowd — everybody riding one those days.

"Listen to this," said this Lavoisier's brother, poking his elbow into me. This Shang was lying up behind the other man, cursing him, telling him to let him go by. Black, putrid oaths — something frightful for talk; you could smell it, almost, over the gasoline.

"He's after him," said Lavoisier.

"What good does that do him?" said I. "He can get by. What's he trying to do to him, anyway?"

This young fellow sat there, chewing his gum, watching them out under his long cap visor.

"Pulling his lung," said he.

"Pulling his lung?"

"Getting his heart."

"Scaring him out, you mean," said I.

"It ain't any different from prize fighting," he told me. "The first thing is to find the yellow streak. Get the heart out of them. Then you got them.

"There's where Joe won out," he went along. "He was nothing to look at. No bigger'n this young kid. But nobody ever scared him yet. He had a heart like a lion. You got to have one, in this game.

"Look at this one here," he said, watching.

"He's done before he's started. Shang's got him, already. He's a good rider too. But he can't stand thinking what this murderer might do to him. He's all in. See that!"

And blur-r-r, Shang Murphy went by him finally. They'd gone now, maybe twenty laps.

"Fifty seconds," said Lavoisier, looking at his watch again. "They won't beat that much.

"Here," he said. "Pegleg's after the other fellow — that young kid."

"Go it, Chuck," I yelled. "Don't let him bluff you."

He was trying that cursing act on the boy — blocking him, and cursing him, pretending the boy was crowding him.

"Pretty raw that," said Lavoisier. "Look at that. See that wabble? He won't let him get by."

I could look down the straight and see the wheel of that Rajah rider — that Hansen — flinch, as Chuck tried to pass him.

"That's the worst I *ever* saw," said this man beside me. "They'll take a lot from a Rajah rider — the judges. But they can't stand for that, forever. Look at him hold. Look at him block him."

That Shang Murphy was sailing around after them as if they were tied.

"That's how they go down," said Lavoisier — "just one touch of the front wheel on the back one ahead of you. That's how they killed all those bicycle riders in those old paced races. That's

how Jimmy Michael got what he died from finally, if you only knew it. Going at speeds like that — once is enough!"

"E-e-e-eh," yelled the grand stand beyond us. Chuck Powers had jumped his man at the turn; sailed up and over and down again, like a swallow over a barn.

But almost — within a fraction of an inch, it looked like, from the edge of the track.

"You see that," said Lavoisier, turning around. He was warming up, and getting more talkative as the race went on. "You see that? Some chances. That kid's either got his nerve or he's crazy. Did you see that Hansen; he ran him right up the track. If the kid wasn't so quick — one eyelash, and it was all over!

"The same game. The same game," he said, and spit between the benches. "The same way that bunch of murderers got old Joe. If these judges stand for that, they'll stand for murder with a gun. Take them out! Take them out and shoot them; and get it over with!" he started yelling.

"Look!" said I.

"Ah-hah, I thought so," said he, sitting down.

They were waving Hansen off the track.

"He was looking for it, I guess," said Lavoisier. "They put him in probably to pocket this new man. It looks to me as if they were afraid of him. Who is this kid, anyhow? He's quite a good little rider, at that. He won't scare, that's one thing. And he's got some machine there, too. Listen to

that exhaust, will you? Like a three hundred dollar watch. And look — look at her pick up!"

That boy of ours — loose again — was just eating up that third man — the one that Murphy had scared out.

"Look at this," said I to Lavoisier. "Here's another one. Look at him all over the track. Look at him wabble!"

"That ain't it," he said. "That ain't on purpose. That's where Shang cut the heart out of him. He thinks he's coming into a pinch again. He's getting nervous again when he thinks of them passing him. He ought to be taken off; he's scared till he's dangerous."

But then — all at once the man straightened out, as Chuck came up to him; and the boy went by flying.

"That's how they get," said Lavoisier, "when they get thinking once of what would happen if they went down at those speeds. He's done. There's only two left on the track now."

"Hey, look at that kid go!" I said, watching Chuck.

This other man sat still, taking it on the stop watch.

"Forty-five seconds," he said, as if he didn't believe it. "A mile in forty-five."

The old Hoodlum was running right over them. The whole crowd got it, yowling — as Chuck came right up on Murphy. The feeling was turning a little, too, on the riders. Chuck was getting them on account of his size.

I could see old Pasc in the pit, down there under the track, holding his stop watch — following her and listening to her go.

She was going like a bird. It looked good for us.

This Lavoisier's brother was listening, too.

"Some machine that. She's got fifteen seconds on that Rajah, I believe, to the mile. She's playing circles round her.

"Here's where the race begins," he said, "between these two." And I sat forward, watching; knowing he was right. The whole thing came now for us.

"This fellow's got the machine," he was going on, "all right; and he's got plenty of sand. But can he stand it, when that murderer once starts after him?"

And right after that it started.

"Hear that. Listen to that," said Lavoisier, when they went roaring by. "He's getting after him, pulling his lung!"

I've heard some foul talk in my day, but nothing like that this thing was putting out under his breath at Tom's boy, as they shot by us.

"Try it — Try it — you —" he said. "Take a chance. Go on."

Bang — just before he got to us — up and around — Chuck went by him — not waiting a second."

"Good boy," said Lavoisier's brother. "Good boy. You got something! You got something this time! You big bum," he yelled at Murphy.

And sat down again quick, watching.

"Look, look," he said. "He almost ran away from him entirely. He almost lost him. Too bad! Too bad!"

"He can lie in behind, I suppose," said I.

"Forever! Like a paced race, exactly. You can't shake him, with the front machine taking off all the wind pressure.

"That's a mistake," he said, talking all the time now. "That kid must have lost his mind."

I saw what was going on. The Hoodlum was ahead now, and the boy was doing what Pasc said they would — pulling the insides out of that old piece of junk of that Rajah crowd.

"It takes twice the power driving that first one," said Lavoisier.

"You watch her," said I.

He didn't answer me; he was timing her again.

"Do you know what I made that?" he said to me. "Forty-three seconds!" And he started timing it over again.

The grand stand was catching it now — yelling, all the time, at those two brown streaks. The third man was off the track now entirely.

"They can't do it," said Lavoisier to me. "They can't build them to take punishment like that mile after mile."

"*He* don't think that way," said I, when Shang Murphy went by, still cursing in that low voice at Chuck ahead of him — trying to "pull his lung" still; pretending he wanted to go by.

"Look out! Look out! The next time! The

next time!" He kept saying — trying to get him jumpy.

The kid said nothing; went riding right along, according to orders.

"That'll do for you," this great freak was saying to him, going by — pretending Chuck was blocking him on the turns. "I won't do anything to you now — but crack you open and spill you on the track."

Tom's boy never turned a hair; just kept going, and the more he went along, the madder that great ugly freak behind him got.

"You'll get yours before this afternoon's over," he called out to him, in that hoarse stage whisper. "You heard about the other ones that got fresh. You know all about that Joe Lavoisier," he said to him. I heard him say it myself. "Well, you look out, that's all."

I looked sideways, and saw that Joe Lavoisier's brother's face. He sat back, stopping talking, looking out under the long visor, with steel-blue murder in his eyes.

It must have been about half over now. Round and round they kept spinning at that devilish pace. The little one ahead and the big one chasing. He didn't curse so much now.

"He's tired, I believe," I said to Lavoisier's brother.

"You don't know what it's like," said he, "pounding those turns at those speeds. Your wrists and neck. It almost kills you. Bang — like falling from a second story on your head!

That's where the small fellow has the advantage. The big one's showing it naturally."

"I notice he isn't curving so much," I said.

"Maybe he's thinking up something," said Lavoisier's brother. "Something wicked."

"How can he when the other fellow's always out ahead of him? He needs his breath, that's his trouble!"

"It isn't over yet," he said. "One of the machines may break, any time."

That was just what I was waiting for — to hear that Rajah crack, the ignition or one of those automatic valves on her. But there was nothing of the kind. That Shang Murphy was a wonder in handling a machine — keeping her going. They're born that way; they can feel a machine, a good rider, at those speeds, and what's the matter with her, just as if it was a part of their own flesh. The two kept going that way, ding-dong, mile after mile.

"He's not saying a word now, is he!" said I, watching him. "He's all in."

"He's worse that way. He's framing up something in his mind," said Lavoisier. "That's when you want to look out."

And all at once — wow! — the grand stand went up in the air, beyond us, in the middle.

"He's jumped him!" said Lavoisier, looking.

"Who has!"

"That kid," he said. "That kid's jumped him. He caught him asleep!

"Gee, some kid," he said. "Some get-away. Some speed. He's got clean away from him!"

"What do you think of that, you big stiff?" he said, getting up suddenly, and shaking his fist; and sat down again, studying his watch.

"Forty-one!" he said, finally. "A mile in forty-one." It had never been done before, or anything like it. The Hoodlum was running away; around the track again after the other one, like a cyclone after a farmer's wagon.

The grand stand started yelling — jeering Murphy.

"That's what gets him. Look out for murder now. If he tries to pass him," said Lavoisier's brother.

"That's just what he'll do," said I, and he did — shot up right beside him.

The big one started for a second — to run him up to track, and stopped when the grand stand started groaning.

Chuck ran right up beside him. You could have thrown a blanket over the two of them as they went by us.

"Come on, you poor old stiff! Come on!" said Chuck, as they went by — and pulled her out some more.

"Bang!" something went on the Rajah. He'd done the trick for us — what we were after.

"She's blown! Blown!" I yelled. "The piece of junk!"

"Valve stuck," said Lavoisier.

The old Hoodlum, with Tom's boy on her, sailed on away,— the grand stand laughing, howling.

"That finishes it," said I.

"No," said Lavoisier.

"Why not?"

"Not if he can murder him. Look at him," he said. "He's laying back for him — deliberately."

He'd got his machine working again — the valve working.

"What's he going to do?" said I.

"I don't know. He don't himself. He ain't human any more — since they ragged him in the grand stand. He's just murder and sudden death, going eighty miles an hour. There ain't any more brains in that head now than a rattlesnake's. Just nothing but the idea of hitting out and killing something.

"He don't want to pass him," said Lavoisier's brother! "That fool kid don't want to go by him again."

But he did — he tore right up to him — again — one brown streak up to another. Before he got there, at all, the other one was cursing him.

"Keep off, you," he said. "You've crowded me once too often, once too often."

Tom's boy was running beside him, their elbows touching. He didn't budge an inch. All at once it came — right opposite us, where the officers couldn't see it.

"Look out!" yelled Lavoisier's brother, standing up in his seat.

I saw Tom's boy staggering.

"He gave him the knee," said Joe Lavoisier's brother from where he stood. "The damned dou-

ble murderer. I saw him. He gave him the knee."

And the grand stand didn't even groan — all watching.

It was all over in a minute. Both of them staggered from the thing, going at that speed.

But he must have missed him — so he didn't get the full blow anyway.

"He's caught himself," I heard this Lavoisier say. And I saw myself that Tom's boy was safe — straightened out again, when — bang! — the big freak wabbled and went down himself — tired out, crazy mad, teetering at that awful speed, I suppose, like a man all gone, running, stumbling, and going down. That last push had been too much for him.

Off he went, flying clear of the machine; rolled, slid up, and slid down the slope, like an old bag, with the machine behind him, sliding down into the pit.

"A-ah," said the grand stand crowd, drawing in its breath.

"There's yours! There's yours!" yelled Joe Lavoisier's brother, up beside me. "There's yours at last, you damned murderer!"

And the grand stand went silent — waiting.

All you could hear was the popping of that machine, on its side; and the sound of the old Hoodlum slowing up on the Bowl above it.

I turned around to keep this Joe Lavoisier's brother quiet.

CHAPTER VII

TOM'S BOY

"Shut up, you fool," said I. "That's no way to act. The man's killed."

"Aw, to hell with him," said Joe Lavoisier's brother, watching under that long cap visor. "He ain't killed. Nothing struck him."

I could see, myself, one of those long, leather legs moving, when that little bunch opened up a little around him in that pit.

"Only scratched up some, that's all," said my man, watching still.

"That young guy," he said after a while, "he's the boy. He's there! He's just like Joe was. You can't scare him. He's got a heart like a lion. He reminds me of him. He looks like him on the track. A little fellow," he said, turning around to me. "A little fellow. But a heart like a lion! Like Joe. Like old Joe was!" and pulled that loud checked cap down over his eyes again.

They were standing Murphy up on his feet again, down under us, and everybody was getting up and starting out from the grand stand.

"Well, good day," said this Joe Lavoisier's brother, in that hoarse voice of his, nodding; and went on by me.

"Good day," said I, and stood there still, look-

ing down on to the pit, watching them all get ready to come up over the track.

"Hello," said somebody right back of me — a woman.

I turned around, and there stood Zetta Thomas, with a couple of rows of seats between us.

"Why, hello!" said I. "Where'd you come from?"

"That's a long story," said Zetta, laughing, showing those white teeth of hers. "But wasn't it great? Wasn't it glorious — huh? Did you ever see anything like it?" she said, as I was stepping over the benches to get to her. "The way the good old Hoodlum went! And that boy — that Chuck Powers!

"My! Think what we owe him. Imagine," she said, watching down where they were climbing up out of the Bowl; pulling at the tips of her gloves, impatient and restless as usual. "Imagine, if he had fallen down on us! But now, think what he's done for us."

"You've done something, yourself, if my memory's good!" said I, thinking where we'd have been if she hadn't put up that ring for us.

"It's nothing to what he's done," she said, her cheeks red, and her eyes snapping, looking down. She certainly was a handsome woman as she stood there that afternoon, dressed up in some kind of a black and yellow dress.

"For this makes it all right for us," she said. "Now — don't it?"

"I hope so," said I. "It'll certainly help!"

"When are we going down there to see them?" she asked me, impatient as a two-year-old.

"Let's let the crowd out a little first," I told her; "and then we can get around there, and see them down by the dressing rooms.

"But where'd you come from?" I asked her.

"I couldn't stay away, that's all. I tried it, but I couldn't. I couldn't sit there, any longer — waiting. Without jumping out of my skin!"

"I don't blame you," I said. "Your own race, you paid for. But when'd you start? How'd you get here?"

"How'd I get the money, you mean?" she said, laughing.

And I grinned.

"Well, I'll tell you how," she said. "I got it from the grocer. I told him I had to have it. Something had come up that was life and death to me. And Pasc was away out of town, and everybody else I could go to. So he let me have it."

"How much did he give you?" I asked her.

"Ten dollars."

"But that would only get you here. It wouldn't take you back."

"I know that. But I knew I'd find you here, didn't I?" she said, looking at me.

I had to laugh; in spite of myself.

"Zet," I said, "you're a corker."

And she laughed back, flashing those teeth at me.

"Pasc don't know it, at all, eh?" I asked her.

"Know it. No. Wait till you see his face! But it was worth it. It was great, wasn't it?

We've won out," she said. "We've made our bets, and we've won. And now come on. I guess we can go over now, and see the boys — Pasc and that rider who won out for us."

So we went around that way finally, talking about the race and Chuck Powers.

"*Hel*-lo!" said Pasc, seeing her — the way he always did, like an older person talking to a nice child; and grinned that old sudden, jack lantern grin of his. "So you thought you'd come!"

"I had to, Pasc," she said, and kissed him. "Wasn't it great? Where is he?" she asked. "I want to see him."

"Who?" said Pasc.

"That Chuck — that boy who rode for us."

"Oh, he'll be out pretty soon," he told her, "if you wait here."

And we stood there, talking about what it was going to mean to us.

"What did I tell you all the time?" Zetta wanted to know.

"We've done it this time, I guess," I said. "There won't be any doubt now when they come to picking between our machine and the Rajah. Not to anybody who ever hears about this race."

"You know what?" said Pasc. "I've got orders now for ten separate machines, and two agencies in New York, without stepping out of my tracks — just around the dressing room."

"Didn't I tell you so," said Zetta, "always? I knew it — all the time. Boys," she said, and grabbed my coat sleeve, "we're all going to be rich!

And when we do get this money, boys — listen — we're going to have some excitement out of it. We're going to live.

"You remember what I said to you? When I turned in my ring for this?" she asked me. "About what I'd do, when you came to settle with me; when our money came in?"

She had stars down in her eyes — pure deviltry; like you see sometimes in a young devil of a horse.

"What do you take me for," I said; "I don't forget my debts that way."

"I mean it," she said, staring right at me with those steady black eyes of hers.

"So do I," I said, laughing at her.

"And I'll tell you another thing," she said, still looking at me, "if you want to know it!"

"What's that?"

"And that is you can never pay this boy — this rider for what he's done for us today."

And we looked over, and just that minute old Tom's boy was coming toward us, out of the dressing room.

"I can try," I said to her. "I generally do."

"Isn't he a handsome boy," said Zetta, seeing him.

"I don't know," I said, "I never thought of it — one way, or the other."

He was though, in a way. He had this devil-may-care style to him — even then — and that bold, kind of insolent way of looking at you, when he wanted to, that kind of took the women — as it came out afterwards.

"Goodness," said Zetta. "I didn't realize he was so old as that. He looked so little next to that big ogre of a thing he rode against."

"I wouldn't tell him that."

"Why not?"

"They don't like to be told about it when they're little."

"He's not so small," she said, "when you see him this way.

"If he had been younger," she said, and laughed back over her shoulder at me, going out to meet him, "if he was what I thought he was, I was just going to take him around the neck, and give him a big hug and a kiss."

And she went up, holding out both her hands to him.

"It was great," she said to him. "Great. Just splendid. You beat him all to pieces — that great big beast of a thing. Didn't you? I almost died, watching you, from excitement."

"You know what she said to me, Chuck?" said I. "She said if you were only a little younger, she certainly would have kissed you."

"Go as far as you like," said Chuck, but his face got fire-colored; he dropped her hands, right away, and stood there.

"I would," said Zetta, standing looking at him in that straight-out way of hers. "I meant it. If you'd been three years younger, I certainly would have done it, too.

"For you saved our lives," she said. "You don't know how much we owe you."

"Not so bad as that, I guess," said Tom's boy, shifting on to his other foot.

"You did," said Zetta. "Maybe you've made us rich — by this. And if it does," she said, "you want to make them pay you for it, too."

"We will," said I. "Don't you fret. I generally manage to pay my debts to most people, whatever I owe them, whether it's a good turn or a bad one. I always have.

"And you did us one this time, Chuck, all right — a good one. We've got to hand it to you," said I. "You did the job today."

"Aw, I don't know," he said, looking up and down again. "You'd ought to killed me, if I hadn't. I had twenty seconds on him to the mile. I had the only machine on the track."

"And you rode it, in the second place," said I. "You can't tell me. I saw you. That big murderer didn't scare you much, did he, boy?" I said, slapping him on the shoulder. "He didn't turn a hair on you."

"Who?" said Tom's boy, stiffening up and looking in my eyes again. "That big stiff. Not in a thousand years!"

"How much was he hurt, anyhow?" I asked him.

"Oh, not much."

"How much?"

"Splinters, that's all — from that board track — right through the leather; stuck all over him, like a dressmaker's pincushion."

"Nothing broke?"

"Not so far as they can see."

"Well, you gave him what was coming to him this time, anyway."

"He did it himself," said Chuck. "He wouldn't have done it, if he hadn't been mad with the heat, after the grand stand jollied him."

"It's too bad you didn't kill him," said I. "He needed it. The damned murderer. And you want to look out for him after this. He'll be laying for you. He'll get you if he can."

"He can try!" said Tom's boy, glancing up at me a second again, with those eyes of his.

"Well, there's one thing," I said to him. "You won't lose anything by this day's work, not if I can help it."

"Look," said Zet, breaking in, "I tell you what we're all going to do now. We're all going over to New York to some big restaurant, and celebrate!"

I saw Pasc grin, and I did, after him.

"You've got the money for it, I suppose," I said to her.

"No, but you have — somebody!" she came back at me.

"We won't have — not when we get these bills here paid," said I.

"What'll we do then?" she said. "We've got to celebrate somehow."

"We haven't made our million — yet, remember," I said to her.

"Here," said Tom's boy, "I can let you have it — if I can collect on this prize."

"That won't be necessary, I guess," said Pasc,

and grinned again. "I've got it; I've got enough for that — from what I got in part payments on those machines."

"All right then," said Zetta, "come on."

"Go it while you're young, eh?" said I, feeling pretty good myself.

"We won't be, any too long," she said. "I don't propose to miss any of it from now on."

And we laughed.

"Well," said Tom's boy, backing away. "I guess I'll be going."

"Going? Going where?" said Zetta. "You're coming with us. Why, certainly you are. This is your party, mostly. Unless you've got some other place you'd rather go," she said, fastening her eyes on him. "Have you?"

"No," he said, looking up, and grinning at her, "I guess not."

"Well, then, come along then," said Zetta.

"Do you all want me?" he said, looking at me.

"Sure, we all want you. Why wouldn't we?" I told him.

"They'd have nothing to say about it anyhow," said Zetta. "This was our race. I paid for it, and you rode it."

"I'll just run across here," he said, when we stopped laughing at her. "I've got to polish myself up for a minute."

"Hurry up then," she said. "We'll be waiting for you. We'll walk slow, and you'll catch up with us."

"He's not much more than a kid, after all," she

said to us, watching after him running back. "The kid freckles aren't all off his face yet."

"He's half a boy, I guess, and half a man," I said.

And then she turned around quick, and shoved her arms through Pasc's and mine, and started along between us.

"This is our night, boys," she said, looking up, "isn't it? We've just got to celebrate some way.

"The only thing," she said, "to make it complete would be if Polly was here, wouldn't it? Have you telegraphed her yet?" she said to me. "Well, you ought to be ashamed of yourself. You'll do it, just as soon as we can find an office. She mustn't wait a minute, sitting worrying about it."

"That's right," said I.

"I can see her eyes snap, when she gets it," said Zetta. "I can almost hear her stammer, getting excited. She'd ought to be here, Bill. She put as much into it as any of us — more."

"I guess that's right, too," said I.

"She'd take her heart out and give it to you, Bill," she said, looking at me —"if you wanted it."

"And then get mad, if I didn't take it!" I said and laughed.

"You don't deserve her, Bill," she said, laughing back. "She's too good for you, and that's the truth."

"I guess it is, at that," I told her.

"Or for any of us. She's an angel. A kind of a little spunky angel. I always think of her that way."

"A fighting angel, eh," said I.

"Yep," said Zetta, "they have them that way. I read it when I was in school — in Milton's 'Paradise Lost.'

"Look! Come on!" she said, looking back of her shoulder. "Here he comes."

As we went out into the street, there was that poster that fellow of ours had pasted out on the walls and fences.

HOOT — TOOT!

GET OUT OF OUR ROUTE!

HOODLUM!

CHAPTER VIII

A MIRACLE BY THE TAIL

It certainly did look rosy, on the face of it, right after that. Every mail was full of orders and applications for agencies — for days and weeks. The women especially got all excited over it.

"See here," said Polly, pulling out this paper, when I came home. It was the second week after that race. "See here, didn't you tell me we were going to sell two hundred machines a year?"

"We ought to do that, anyhow," said I.

"And didn't you tell me you'd make fifty dollars on every car?"

"Nearer sixty," said I, "when we're going right."

"But that would be twelve thousand dollars a year!"

"Yep," said I.

"Oh," she said, and kept still. I don't suppose we'd ever had fifteen hundred dollars a year before to spend on ourselves.

But I didn't speak about the rest of it to her naturally. I just kept up a terrible thinking to myself. I had for several days and nights then.

"What's the matter with you?" said Polly. "You don't sleep at all."

"Oh, I don't know," said I. "Something I ate, I guess."

"Well, I guess not," she said, miffed; "not when I'm cooking for you."

"Maybe I ought to cut out coffee," I said. "I've been drinking quite a lot lately."

"What you'll have to cut out," she said, "is working all day; and thinking about it all night. Go to sleep."

"Don't worry about me," I said, "when I get tired doing a good business — making money — I'll let you know."

And I lay still, and figured on it — the way I was doing all the time now, to see if I couldn't find some loophole. It was no use to bother Pasc about it. It wouldn't be any good; and that was my end of the business anyhow. But finally he got it himself.

"Here's a funny thing," said Pasc, coming in and sitting down in the office after six o'clock. "I wish you'd explain it to me."

"What?" I asked him.

"We claim we can turn out three hundred machines a year here."

"Yes."

"And we're going to."

"I see orders for three hundred right now," said I.

"How are we going to?"

"You don't mean machinery? We can make them up, or get them made now; you know that."

"No, I mean money," said Pasc. "How are you going to get the money?"

"I wish I knew," said I. And I shut up and let him talk.

"As I understand it," said Pasc, getting out his old envelope and stub again, "you get twenty-five percent. down from the dealer, with the order; and twenty-five more when you deliver; making fifty percent. when your delivery is made. And the rest on sixty days."

"Yes."

"So if you sell a machine for two hundred dollars to a dealer, you get one hundred dollars from him and it costs you one hundred and fifty dollars."

"Yes."

"So while you seem to be making fifty dollars on a machine, you're really out fifty dollars in actual money for every machine that goes out from the shop."

"To say nothing of the time before that," I said, "while we've got the machine being made in the factory."

"Yes," said Pasc, with his old blue eyes on me, wetting his old pencil and going on with his figuring.

"Now then," he said slowly, "if it stopped some time — this thing — we'd catch up, and get our money in. But now, growing the way we are, we never can catch up; it gets worse every day."

"Is that right?" he asked me, looking up. "I want to get that right."

"That's right."

"Then that's a peculiar thing, ain't it?" he said. "The more money we seem to be making, the less we've got. You wouldn't believe it!"

"Peculiar, yes," I said. "Damned peculiar! And damned dangerous!"

"Dangerous!" said he.

"It's going to bust us, if we don't look out."

"Bust us!" said Pasc, stopping and getting it into his head. "Hm! Making money so fast it'll bankrupt us. That's a new one!"

"What are we going to do about it?" he asked me, after a while.

"You tell me!"

"You can't cut down expenses much more."

"No."

"Nor take any more of the work ourselves."

"Not and live!"

"Well," said he, "there's only one thing then, I suppose."

"What?"

"You've got to stop your deliveries till you get some of your money in."

"You can't."

"Can't?"

"No. How can you?" I asked him. "You know those dealers as well as I do. They're in business to sell a machine when an order comes for one, ain't they? If they don't get deliveries from us, they'll sell somebody else's, won't they?"

"Good and sure," said Pasc.

"But it don't stop there. If we lost that order, it wouldn't be so much. One order's not so much. But what we lose is the dealer. If we can't deliver goods, he starts for the fellow who can — and hitches up with him."

"Naturally."

"But that ain't all," I said. "The minute he does that, he not only don't push our machine any longer; he knocks it, by comparison anyhow. And no matter what a reputation you've got, or what your goods are, you can't stand continual knocking like that — especially with a thing like ours — a motor cycle — where the ordinary man don't have any real knowledge enough but what a dealer can tie him all up in ten minutes' talking."

"So we've got to keep growing!" said Pasc, after a while. "Anyhow!"

"Unless we want to die."

"That's a funny thing," he said, thinking awhile. "If you grow you bust, and if you don't grow you bust just the same. You're damned if you do, and you're damned if you don't. And as it is, we're in danger of being killed by over-prosperity — too much business."

"That's about it," said I.

"What are we going to do about it?" he asked me after a while.

"There's just one thing," I said, "that's all. I've been thinking over it day and night; we've got to get more money, somehow."

"Credit?"

"I guess that's all you can get," said I. "I've got Briscoe and Company to help us out, some, by showing them what we were doing. That's our biggest account, of course, and I'm working on some of the others."

"What about the bank?" he wanted to know.

"I've been trying to get Proctor Billings over here for a week to look us over," I said, "to see if he won't give us a little more than that one thousand dollars we've got now. He says now he'll be over tomorrow.

"I God," I said, thinking. "What a power these fellows have got that control the money! You don't realize it until you go in business for yourself; and get up against a thing like this.

"You sweat and drag and work eighty-one hours a day. And when you're through the day, and covered with dust and oil, and blisters, one of these damned still-faced dudes from a bank drives over in his limousine, with a flower beside him in a little glass vase, and decides whether you're going to live or die. That thing drives me crazy. It always has, ever since I was in business — to have to get down and crawl around to men like Proctor Billings, and ask them for permission to go on living."

"What will he do for us in the bank?" asked Pasc. I can see him still, sitting there in his overalls, with his envelope and pencil stub; and his old faded eyes staring out at me over a smear of machine oil on one of his old prominent cheek bones.

"Not much."

"What'll you do, then, if he won't help us?"

"I'll have to try and tease the creditors along the best way I can."

"It ain't normal, is it?" said he. "This way we're doing?"

"No. But what can you do?"

"Get some money in from somewhere."

"Yes," I said, "if we could. I thought maybe I might get some idea out of Proctor Billings along that line — if he comes."

He came that next day, as a matter of fact, locked up in his limousine, wearing his chamois gloves, and went through the shop with me, as if it was a special favor to me; and Pasc came along for a minute and spoke to him, and looked at him, all smeared up with machine oil so he couldn't shake hands. And then Billings flicked off his new gray suit with a fine handkerchief, and sat down in the office for a minute or two, and listened to me talk without any more expression on his face than the bottom of a china plate.

"I don't see how," he said finally, getting up, "I can be of any use to you. We can't take on any more of a loan for you in the bank. You're overextended too much. You aren't in any condition for a bank to take up — from what you say yourself."

"What can we do?" said I, getting desperate, and mad. He always got me on the raw, just looking at him riding around the town.

"You'll have to get in more money," he said in that particular, college educated talk of his.

"That's what I'm trying to get now," I told him, getting madder.

"In the form of capital," he came back at me.

"How'll I get it?"

"That I don't know," he said. "All I can say is, we'll continue our loan at the bank, but we can't possibly go any farther."

And then he went out and got in his limousine, and left me there jumping mad, cursing him under my breath as he drove away.

"We'll pull it out in spite of him," I said to Pasc. "And we're well off, if we never get any of that kind in with us. He and the old man together," I said, "didn't have blood enough in them for an eel.

"We'll pull her through," I said, talking along to encourage myself. "We've got a big thing, and I know it, and by working it along right, we'll come out all right. We've got a big thing; and you take a man like old man Briscoe — he's big enough to see it.

"I've got to keep on the right side of him," I said. "He's a quick-tempered old man, but straight as a die. Always willing to help you out — if he thinks you're doing your part. A fine old man — if he is a millionaire! A regular oldtime New England mechanic that's earned his living with his own hands.

"Not one of these bankers — with soft hands and hard faces! Not one of these fellows with the money, that earn their living by their faces — never right out like a man; always bluffing you, keeping you from knowing what they really think, or plan, or mean to do to you. I hate the whole tribe of them."

"How'd you happen to know old man Briscoe, anyway?" said Pasc.

"I worked for him one year down in his shop in Bridgeport. The only year I ever was out of this

town since I was born. He's the man we've got to watch," I said, "after this — like a hawk. Do what we tell him we'll do, to the dot; or there'll be trouble."

"You'll do it, all right," said Pasc, getting up and taking off his overalls.

I stayed around there a little longer — till old Tom Powers came in for the night.

"Hello, Tom," said I, putting on my coat. "Well, how's the old Miracle coming on for you these days? How's she coming?"

"Good," said Tom. "How's yours?"

"Too darned good," said I.

"How's this?" he wanted to know.

"We're selling them so fast it's busting us," I said, and I stopped and told him a little something about the trouble we had to get money to fill our orders, coming in so fast.

"What do you think of that, Tom?" I asked, to see what the old man would say.

"They're strange acting things," he said, "these Miracles."

"They are, by Cripes," I said. "If we don't look out, this one of ours is liable to be too much for us."

"That's the trouble with them," said Tom. "You can't tell where they'll land you. You can't tell half the time whether you've got them, or they've got you — after you get hold of one. Half the time all you got is one hand on your Miracle's tail, wondering where she'll go next."

"And you with her, eh, Tom?" said I.

"The trouble with them is," said he, looking up without cracking a smile on that old skeleton's face of his. "They're so much bigger than a man is. That's the trouble with them."

And I laughed and went out. You never could quite make the old man out. He was a queer one. There was always apt to be a lot of sense in that stuff he was getting off.

CHAPTER IX

THE LITTLE PALE BOOKKEEPER

It was a hard, ugly fight. There were three or four times in those next few months when we strained our credit to the limit. And the bank was after us on our balance all the time. We wouldn't have got through, if Briscoe and Company and some of the other supply people hadn't helped us out on the showing in our statements — watching us, of course, like hawks, every minute.

But this particular time things were a little bit easier. I'd got a little money in — cash down from one or two of the dealers; and I was feeling pretty good.

"I tell you what I think, Pasc," said I. He had come in for a minute, between jobs, and we sat there in the office. "I believe we're beginning to see daylight. I believe, if we turn a few more corners and take care, and do everything just so, we'll pull out; these people will see us through on the basis of our profits."

"That's good," said Pasc.

"And they've got a right to. If nothing scares them," I said. "Do you know what I think?"

"No."

"I've been figuring up lately what we are making here. What do you think we are likely to pull out

of this thing, if it comes out right? This year, I mean."

"I haven't the slightest idea," said Pasc, lying back in his chair, watching me, with his long bony legs in his overalls stretched out ahead of him.

"Twenty-five thousand a year! Laugh, if you want to," I told him, "but it's so — if it keeps going the way it is now; if we pull it through all right.

"I hope we can," I said. "I'd like to do it. I never knew how we could get outside capital in, if we wanted it. But I never wanted to get it, if I could help it.

"I tell you, Pasc," I said. "I always felt this way. I always thought, when people got up a business and pushed it through, they were the ones who ought to have the benefit of it, and not outsiders. Not outsiders — these men with the money, like Proctor Billings, for example. I don't know as I ever told you, but I've always had a suspicion, since that time he looked us over, and I showed him our statements for his bank, that he's had his eye on us, more or less. I think he thinks there's something here he'd like to get in on. There have been several signs of it, for one thing; and then I've been told so, straight. I hope he never does get us where we would have to let him in. There's one kind of man I can't stand."

"Seems to me I heard you say that before," said Pasc, grinning.

"Yes, and you'll hear me saying it again, probably," said I. "We're a different breed of pups. We don't take to each other naturally.

"What I want to see out of this business," I said, "is our people, you and I, and the folks that have worked with us to build this up — get what there is in it."

And just then I saw that Myrtle — that little bookkeeper we got from business college to take Wilkins' place — look up at the clock all at once, and put on her coat in a hurry and go out.

"I wonder what's she's forgot now?" I said to myself.

And I looked up at the clock myself, and saw she was going over to the bank — late as usual.

"Late again," I said to Pasc. "She couldn't be on time if her life depended on it. She's got to hustle now, if she gets in at all."

"She ain't very strong," said Pasc, looking after her.

"She don't look well to me," said I, "and she never has. She looks worse and worse. She hasn't got blood enough in her body to keep a robin alive. I don't think we ought to keep her. Sooner or later she'll have to go anyway."

"No, no," said Pasc, making excuses, as usual. "I don't think so. She'll get on to it, before long."

"I don't believe it," said I. "It isn't in her. She won't do."

"She's conscientious," he came back. "You couldn't find a harder worker, or anybody that was more loyal everywhere."

"That's it," I told him. "If it hadn't been for that, and your begging, she'd been fired long ago."

"Oh, no, she wouldn't, Bill," said Pasc. "You say so, but I know you better than that."

"She's got so now," I said, "she seems to have got kind of panic-stricken, following around, trying to catch up."

"You've got to remember," said Pasc, still finding excuses, "you don't ever see the best side of her. She's scared of you, always."

"Why should she be?" I came back at him. "I always treated her right."

"I know you have, always. More than right. But you don't realize, sometimes, I believe," he said, "how you impress people who don't really know you, Bill. You're so darned positive about everything you do. You go after everything so strong."

"Maybe I do," I said. "But that don't make any difference in what we're talking about. I've told her she could have help if she wanted it."

"I know you have, Bill," said Pasc. "That's perfectly true. But she wants to do it all herself; she's told me about it. You could see how you'd feel. She thinks it's her one great chance — just like the rest of us. She's ambitious to do it all herself — to show she can; so if she does make good, it will be better pay for her afterwards. She's ambitious in her way. And she's got this mother and sister at home, kind of partly dependent upon her."

"I know all that," said I.

"She's ambitious, naturally," Pasc went along. "She wants to do it all. And she's over-conscientious. That's the trouble. I honestly think half

her trouble is because she's always working in our interest. I think she's trying to save us money, trying to do so much herself."

"I do myself," I told him. "That's the devil of it."

"And she thinks sometimes she'll handle it."

"That's just it," I said. "Look at it now. Out twenty minutes, just going around to the bank. She can't do it. The job's too big for her. She can't follow it around. I'm sorry for the kid, just as you are, but the thing's too big for her; that's all there is to it."

"It's been pretty big for most of us," said Pasc —"when you come right down to it."

"It isn't killing either of us yet," I said, seeing again how pale her face was, when she went out — with that kind of bluish look to it, like skimmed milk; as if the blood was all out of her body. And great dark-blue rings around her eyes.

"Where is she now, anyhow?" I said, wondering what kept her at the bank; and remembering her face, again, I suppose, as she went out.

"She'll be back in a minute," said Pasc.

"I don't want to work her to death, anyhow," I said. "I don't want her to die on our hands."

I was worried about her, too. I used to find her there evenings, when we were ready to close — struggling to catch up, fighting the figures on those books of hers; trying to get them right. I had to send her home.

"I'm sorry for her," I said, looking up at the clock again, wondering why she stayed; "we both

are. But we might be a darn sight sorrier for ourselves for something she might do to us. She might be a dangerous thing to us. She's got so now you can't rely on her. And she'll make some bad mistake we can't afford."

And I turned and looked at the clock again to see when she was coming.

"Well," said Pasc, "I guess we can try her a little longer."

And just then I saw her, finally, outside, coming on the street. She was a homely kid, thin and small; and always dressed in a blue serge suit that seemed as if it was falling off of her, and a little round cheap hat.

She came in the door — holding her bank book and this slip in her hand. And I got up. I could see from the color of her face that something had happened.

She didn't say a word. She came right in, and walked right by us, and sat down at her desk — and threw her arms down and her face on them, and started crying; not loud, but as if she was going to tear herself all to pieces.

"What is it?" said I. "What's the matter now?"

And Pasc went over beside her, trying to stop her.

But we couldn't get a word out of her; either of us. She just lay with her face hidden, and when we tried to make her talk, she'd just sob a little worse, and bury her face in deeper.

"What is it?" we kept asking her. "What is it?"

But she just hunched her shoulders, crying.

She had on this little cheap round straw hat of hers, and it fell over crooked on one side. In one of her hands, that stuck out, she had her bank book and a slip of paper.

"What have you done?" said I, stiffening up. For I'd got a suspicion of it now. "What is it?" I said. "Come. Come on. Talk. We ain't going to bite you."

And then I reached out, and took that bank book and slip of paper — wet and sticky where she'd cried on it.

I took them away from her.

"By God!" I said, when I looked.

"Don't," said Pasc to me. "Don't."

He was on the other side of the girl, patting her on the arm.

"You know what she's done?" I said to him, bringing my voice down the best I could. "She hasn't made her deposit today, or yesterday, either."

"Yes?" said Pasc.

"She forgot it entirely yesterday; and she was late today. And in the meanwhile that check to Briscoe and Company has come back, and been protested!

"Is that right?" I yelled at her.

"Don't!" said Pasc. "That don't do any good."

"Look," said I. "That is how it was. The check came in yesterday; and yesterday she didn't go near the bank at all. And she came in late this afternoon, and got the teller to write me this about it."

"YOU KNOW WHAT SHE'S DONE TO US? SHE'S BUSTED US! WIDE OPEN! *Page* 107.

"Isn't that right?" I said to her again, and took hold of her. "Tell me!"

And she bobbed her head up and down, like a crying child on a desk in school.

"Didn't I tell you?" I yelled. "Didn't I warn you that that one thing *must* be attended to!"

I felt Pasc taking hold of my arm, but I shook him off. I was crazy — just about.

"And not today, either," I said. "Yesterday! And you said you'd do it right off."

"You've got to stop this," said Pasc, pulling. "You're scaring her to death."

"Scaring her!" I said turning on him. "Scaring her to death! You know what she's done to us? She's busted us! Wide open!

"You know what they wrote us," I said to him, "what old man Briscoe told us we'd have to do; about that exact agreement we must carry out. Now, not only haven't we done it, but our checks have gone back protested!

"We're through," I said. "He's certain to shut down on us now, I know him exactly. And the minute he does, all the rest of them will be on top of us at once."

Then I stopped talking, and went over and sat in the chair, holding that bank book and that note from the teller — trying to think.

I didn't say anything for a while; and Pasc didn't. There was no noise in the room, but that girl crying, and the machinery outside — going grinding along, out in the shop.

"I told you what would happen," I said to him,

" if you kept her. And I hadn't more than said it when it came!"

" It was our fault, too," said Pasc. " Not seeing it was done."

" Seeing it was done!" I said. " I gave her special instructions yesterday afternoon, just before I left her. And she said she would start right out and do it. Special instructions," I said, " that nobody could miss but an idiot."

" You've got to stop that," said Pasc, setting his fingers in my arm. " That's no use. It only makes it worse. She's nothing but a kid."

And when she saw him taking her part, the girl started crying louder, letting herself loose, in kind of half hysterics.

" Oh, Lord," I said, walking up and down. " She's got to quit that."

" What are you going to do?" Pasc asked me.

" I'm trying to think," said I.

" It was kind of strange, wasn't it," said Pasc — " their coming down on us like that at the bank. They usually call us up and give us a chance, don't they, in a case like that?"

" Yes, they do," I said. " They have."

" Do you suppose that Proctor Billings would be trying to play some trick on you?"

" I don't know," I said, thinking. " He might. And yet," I said, " they warned me once or twice before, when checks came back on them. But they might be. There might be a hold-up.

" Oh, quit, quit!" I said. That girl kept going on, worse and worse. You couldn't hear yourself

think. "Keep her still," I said. "I've got to think. I've got to work this thing out."

And I went over then and dug out that new statement of the business I'd had made out for us.

Pasc was over trying to stop the girl, patting her on the back of her shoulders, like a little kid.

"It may be a hold-up," I said —"by Billings. I hope it is."

"Hope it is," said Pasc. "How's that?"

"Because if it was just the ordinary thing; if he didn't have any personal interest, he'd just let it slide along. Our account's been no good to them, there's been no money in it for the bank. He'd just let us slide — as you'd expect he would, if there wasn't something in it for himself. You could talk to him all night. He's got no more insides to him than an ice-box.

"On the other hand," I said. "If he planned for it; or thought he saw something in it for himself, I could go right to him and show him he'd got to pull us out,— if he ever wanted to get anything. For once this thing goes smash, it's all over. Humpty Dumpty wouldn't be in it for a minute if this thing went bankrupt!

"Oh, quit, quit," I said to the girl, and went up, and took hold of her arm myself. "Nobody's going to hurt you. Listen," I said, "if you don't stop, you'll have to get out, that's all."

She kind of shivered then and stopped.

Then I got up myself, taking that statement.

"Where you going to?" asked Pasc.

"The only place I can go," said I, starting to go

after my hat. "I'm going to see Proctor Billings.

"She'd better go now," I said to Pasc, nodding over to where that little bookkeeper was still sitting. "She'd better go, anyway, where she can have some other woman with her. Her mother."

She kind of dragged herself to her feet then, and Pasc went over by her.

When I went out, she was getting together her gloves, and veil and stuff — clearing away her own personal stuff from the drawers in the desk. Getting ready to leave her job. And Pasc helping her.

And I went along, cursing her out to myself; wondering if I was going to save anything out of what she'd done.

CHAPTER X

BACK OF THE BANK

The shades were all down at the bank when I got there — drawn for the day. But the door was unlocked. I opened it and stepped in.

"Cripes," I thought to myself. "What a dark still hole it is in here, after hours."

Back of the glass you could see the clerks with their heads down by their green electric light shades — writing. But no one was moving around or talking; and there was nobody at all in the main corridor. So I went along back, my heels clacking on the marble.

"What can I do for you?" said this still-faced fellow, coming out from a door, bowing.

"I want to see Mr. Billings."

"I'm Mr. Billings' secretary," he said, and smiled — with the lower half of his face only.

"I've got to see him personally," I told him.

"I'll see what I can do," he said, and bowed and disappeared again, and left me standing there. It was so still you could hear the pens scratch — those white-fingered clerks working on their books. I stood and watched them. It always looked to me like a curious way of earning your living — sitting there juggling figures in that still hole; more so, I suppose, to a man used to banging around a machine shop all his days.

"Won't you come this way?" said Billings' secretary, coming back, bowing again; and showed me ahead of him into a little private reception room in back, with one electric light going.

"Won't you sit down," he said, and smiled that smile with the lower half of his face again. "He'll see you when he's disengaged."

"All right," said I. "Whenever he's ready."

Then he turned on more light, and bowed and went out again; and left me there.

"You get on my nerves," I said to myself, watching him. "You bow too much to suit me."

I was getting nervous, probably, over this game I was going up against — waiting in this place I wasn't accustomed to.

It was stiller yet in there; a small room, without any outside windows — fixed up regardless, with red leather furniture and highly polished woodwork, and little oil paintings of sheep around the walls. Stiller than underground.

I sat down, and ran over that statement of the business I brought with me; looked at it all again to be sure, and sat waiting — all the time with my eye on that door in the shiny woodwork where Billings' secretary had gone out.

I sat there. Not a sound, from anybody — for ten minutes!

"Cripes," I thought. "He takes his time about it!"

And I got up and walked around and looked at the pictures of the sheep. And watched that shiny door sideways!

It opened once, and my man — the secretary — came back again. And I got up expecting to be ushered in.

"Not yet," he said. "He's still engaged." And he went on out, stepping softly on that oriental rug — every hair in his head and thread in his clothes and muscle in his face just where it ought to be.

And I went back and sat down again — picking at my hat band in my lap, waiting. It struck me sitting there: "How many other fellows must have sat here, in this still hole, just as I am now, waiting — and got turned down!

"I God," I said to myself, "what a power these still-faced fellows have got over you. In these banks! Just sit and smile, and make you wait. Forever, if they want to. Just say they can't see you.

"Refuse to see you at all," I said, half out loud — and pulled out on my collar. And got up on my feet, thinking of it! The sweat came right out on me.

And I sat right down again and stayed there — watching that door as if I expected the devil to pop out of it. Fighting something you know is one thing; fighting something back of a door, that don't make a noise, is another.

"Won't you come in, now?" said Billings' secretary, opening it without a sound.

And he bowed and showed me out ahead of him, still and polite as an undertaker at a country funeral. And I pulled my coat collar down, seeing his smooth

one, and followed down after him into Proctor Billings' private office.

"Come in, won't you?" said Proctor Billings at the door, and held out that long cold hand of his. "Sit down." And smiled with the lower part of his face like that secretary, without the eyes lighting up at all.

Right over him, where he sat down at his desk, hung the face of old man Billings, his father, an oil painting taken just before he died; as like the other man as the two Indians on two copper cents — as I always said — and just as hard. Only the son was polished by his education.

"Will you smoke a cigarette?" he said to me, and handed out his gold case. And I took one, with his gilt monogram on it.

"Now what can I do for you, Mr. Morgan?" he said, making that faint smile on his lips again — with just as much expression in those gray eyes of his as two steel balls would have. And his face fell still again.

"I came to see you about that check of mine," I told him.

"What check?" he asked me.

"That one you sent to protest ——. The one to Briscoe — for insufficient funds," I went on explaining.

Not a flicker in that face, anywhere!

"I'm sorry," he said finally, "but I'm afraid you'll have to tell me all about it."

So I did; what else was there to do? And he sat there watching me, listening — to me explaining

still. I was doing all the talking, I saw that. I was almost begging him now. It made me hot. But the madder I got, the more I had to go along — he doing nothing at all but listening.

"If it had been my fault," I said, "I wouldn't feel so strong about it. I wouldn't feel I had just the same right to be here now, asking you to help us out."

And he nodded, listening, without the slightest expression in his face — one way or the other.

"I don't see now," I said, flaring up a second, in spite of myself, "why it was you didn't notify us, when it happened. Give us a chance, anyway."

"Let's find out," said Proctor Billings, and stuck one of those long white fingers on a push button.

"Was Mr. Morgan's check protested yesterday?" he asked the man who came in — one of the tellers.

"Yes, sir."

"Without notice to him?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"They'd had their two warnings for overdrawing this month," the teller said, and stood up, stiffer than a soldier, watching him — and avoiding my eyes.

"Is that right?" said Billings to me.

"Probably it is," said I. "I told you how it happened."

"We've had a lot of trouble with that account, Mr. Billings," said the teller, still watching him. "You know that."

"That's all," said Proctor Billings, without an-

swering him. "When you go out, will you send me in the card on that account, please."

"Yes, sir," said the teller, and bowed to him, and went out. And I sat there, waiting.

"You see?" said Billings, asking another question.

"Yes," said I.

"That's our rule."

"I see," said I, holding back a second or two to try if he would go on talking. "I see," I said, when he said nothing. "But that doesn't help me any. What I've got to see is how I'm going to get out of this. These Briscoe people are our biggest creditors, giving us special accommodations, under a special agreement. God knows what they'll do to us, when our check goes back to them."

He sat there, waiting, smoking, hearing me explain, with the picture of his father over him, and a vase of cut flowers on his desk, all his ways and face and manners still and quiet and exactly right — and showing exactly nothing of what he thought!

"I've come here," I said, "because you're the only man in the world now that can pull us out."

"Well," he said. "What is it we can do for you?"

"Can't you stop that check before it gets back to them?"

"Let's see," he said, and pushed a button on his desk once more.

"Just where is that check?" he asked the teller, when he came in again. "Could we stop it now before it gets back to Briscoe and Company?"

"I don't know. I don't think so. But I'm not quite sure."

"You see, please."

"All right," the teller said. "And here's that card of the account you were asking for, Mr. Billings."

And he bowed again, and went out. And we two sat there — Proctor Billings looking over my account, while I gaped around at the flowers on his desk and the walls and the picture of old man Billings over him — with his cold face, and his straight lips, and his old long nose, thin as an icicle.

"They certainly do look alike," I said to myself. "The same eyes and mouth — the same long, thin, frozen noses"; and I thought again of what they used to say about the old man — that when he had the nose-bleed it was ice water that came out and froze on his chin.

This young man was just like him, you could see, the same thing exactly, with a college education, trained in this game of keeping his face still, handling money, from the time they gave him his first quarter.

He sat there now, motionless, reading my bank statement.

"I hope you find you can catch the thing, somewhere," I broke in finally.

"Come in," said Proctor Billings, turning to the door. Then the teller walked in again.

"It's too late," he said. "They say that it's gone through. The notification will get to Briscoe and Company tomorrow morning in the mail."

"That's all," said Proctor Billings, dismissing him.

"It can't," I said. I was almost crazy. "You've got to stop it for me somewhere," and I got up on my feet. I felt like a fish with a net around it, drawing in. "We've got to do something!" I said.

"Well," he said, and took another cigarette. "What would you suggest? We'll do all we can for you," he said, and smiled that lip smile of his again —"reasonably."

"Can't you call them up on long distance?" I asked him. "You know them personally, don't you?"

"Yes."

"The old man Briscoe?"

"Very well, indeed."

"Can't you call them up and tell them then?"

"Tell them what?"

"What I told you. About how it happened. About that girl's mistake."

"That wouldn't do you any good now," he said to me, holding his cigarette off and watching it.

"Why not wouldn't it?"

"That isn't what they'd ask me now, if I called them, now their check's gone back; they wouldn't stop there. They'd be sure to ask me now how you stand anyway. How solvent I considered you, myself. That would be it, wouldn't it?" he asked me.

"Probably it might," said I.

"What could I tell them?" he wanted to know while I sat still. "What could I say to them from

this?" he said, and flipped that statement of my bank account across the desk to me.

I looked at it — and laid it down!

"You owe them money, don't you?" he asked me. "And a lot of it?" he asked me.

I nodded to him.

"What they'll want to know of me I should imagine — especially if I call them up — is whether, in my opinion, they'll get it back; what the best thing is for them to do."

"I suppose so," I answered him finally.

"What could I answer them? What could I advise them," he said, "from what I know?"

He had me cold, on the face of the thing — all wrong; explaining, explaining, explaining from the beginning — and still wrong at the end. And he sitting there, watching, asking questions.

He had me there with my back against the wall, fighting for my life; and everything polite and still and smiling, without turning over one of those white hands of his.

It made me hot to see him manœuvering, playing me off my feet in that game of his I didn't know. It made me mad, but at the same time I saw, quick as a flash, it gave me the opening I was after.

"I'll tell you what you can advise them," I said, staring into those metal eyes of his, "if you want to know. And you yourself, too. Just this one thing. If they shut down on us now, we're busted!"

He sat looking at me.

"Naturally," I said, going ahead, "you're interested, too. Or your bank is — to the tune of a

thousand dollars, anyhow. But it's in your hands," I said. "You can let us go on, or you can bust us — for the mistake of a fool-girl bookkeeper, if you want to!"

He sat still, looking at me, behind that mask of his.

"But I want you to understand this," I said, "before you do it. I want you to understand if you do, or they do, you'll both be doing the one thing that'll hurt yourselves most."

"Why?" he asked, speaking again finally, and sat still again, with those polished steel eyes on me.

"I'll show you why," said I. And I pulled out this statement of the business from my pocket.

"You remember the bicycle business," I said. "How much there was left of it when it tumbled?"

He smiled, looking at me — the smile thinner than the edge of a knife.

"Quite well," he said, in that college educated talk of his.

"One pile of junk," said I. "Wheels and screws and tubing!"

"And crazy credits," said he.

"Well, here it is," said I, and tapped my paper, "right over again! With this one difference!"

"What?"

"Stopped, it's the same — a heap of junk. But going, it's a fortune!"

He said nothing at all.

"A fortune," I said, and slapped down the paper on his desk. "Fifty thousand dollars a year, next year, if it keeps going!"

He reached out his hand for it. But I didn't let it go yet.

"And another thing," I said, looking him in those eyes, "it's just as well to understand. This business is our business! And anybody that thinks he can grab it away from us and run it himself, will find when he comes to look at it, he's got just the neck and tail feathers, that's all!

"This is a two-man business," I told him. "We started it and made it and know it. And we're the only ones that do. That business is all carried around under two hats. And nobody wants to make the mistake of thinking they can get it, and set it on its feet, and start it going again, without us. For they can't. That's one sure thing."

"Fifty thousand dollars a year!" he said, paying no more attention to that last talk of mine than as if I hadn't been giving it at all.

"Yes," said I. "Take a look at it!"

And I handed him the statement.

"This will show you the whole thing," I said. "What we've done, and what we've got, and what we're going to do."

He ran his eye down it.

"Who made this out for you?" he asked me. "Is it reliable?"

"It ought to be. I got the best people in town to do it"; and I told him who it was.

He glanced his eye up and down and turned the pages.

"Would you care to let me take this?" he asked me.

"Glad to," said I.

"Over night?"

"Yes, certainly. But in the meantime, what about getting Briscoe and Company on the long distance?"

"It's too late today," he said. "They'll be gone for the night. Besides," he said, and turned that mask of his on me again, talking that polite, cold talk, "what is there I could say to them — yet?"

And he got up from his chair, and stood there, in front of his flowers, under the painting of the old man. And I got up after him. That was all there was for me to do.

"I want to say this thing, though, before I go," said I, looking into those blank eyes of his, "if you do this, naturally we ain't asking you to do it for nothing."

"I see," he said, freezing up stiffer still. "Well, this is scarcely the time to discuss that."

I could see then I hadn't suited him, the way I got at it.

"I'll let you hear from me in the morning," he said, and held out that long hand — and smiled that thin-lip smile.

And I went out, through that empty private reception room with the pictures of the sheep on the wall. Stiller than ever; all the electric lights out but one!

"Cripes," I said to myself, "what a power these still-faced dudes with the money have over you!"

Not a word, not a flicker of an eyelash or a change of a muscle in his face to show where I stood. It was a part of the game they were trained to —

these men that run the banks; these bowing men with white fingers and fine clothes and masked faces — these fellows that deal in money.

"He's got me," I said to myself, out in the twilight in the street. "He's got me right in the palm of his hand. He can ruin me as easy as he can shut up his fingers,— if he thinks that'll figure out best. All he needs to do is to sit and watch and wait. All he's got to do is to do nothing!"

"What a grip they've got on us," I said, turning to go home. "What a great big powerful thing these fellows have got control of!"

CHAPTER XI

AN OPTION

We sat there, Pasc and I, that next morning in our old office, he on his side and I on mine, not saying a word, waiting. I felt rotten. I'd hardly slept all night.

"What do you suppose he'll do to us, now he's got us?" I asked Pasc, finally, sitting there with my head in my hands. I had a headache over my eyes that jumped like a young rabbit.

"I don't know," said Pasc, looking up.

He was over there at that old table he had on the other side of the room from me, with his old stub and envelope out, working like a beaver. He'd got an idea during the night on an auxiliary exhaust, or something, and he was afraid it would get away from him.

"Lord," I said, sitting up. "If the flood came, it would still find you plugging on some improvement on a motor."

"That's all I'm good for," said Pasc, wetting his pencil point with his lips, and looking sideways at the envelope. "But I do expect I can make that exhaust a hundred per cent. better than it is now."

"Sure," I said. "Always!"

And he went on working.

"Cripes," I said, rolling my head in my hands.

"I'd give my left eye to know what's going to happen to us in the next twenty-four hours."

"I wish I could help you out," said Pasc, looking up. "I wish I was some good to you in that line. But there's no use of pretending. I ain't."

And I got up on my feet, starting walking.

"They're a natural mystery to me," said he — "banks and money. They always were."

"They are to most of us," I said, "except those damned pale-faced pirates that run them."

"I always think, somehow," he went along, "of a lot of little fine wheels, meshed in together, running in oil. Stiller'n the wheels in a watch. But they're beyond me!" he said, and went back at his envelope again, for fear he was forgetting something.

"I guess you're right," I said. "They've got a regular system — a regular machine — for extracting money from everybody and everything they come in contact with; every business in the country."

And right after that the telephone started ringing.

"Yes? Hello!" said I, grabbing it.

"Mr. Morgan?" said the voice — that pale private secretary of Billings.

"Yes!"

"Mr. Billings wishes me to say he will see you at 10:30 — if you are at liberty."

"I'll be there!" said I.

"Thank you. Then he'll look for you," he said, politer than ever, and hung up.

"At liberty!" I said, starting marching around again. "At 10:30! Cripes! He's in no hurry

about this thing! Old man Briscoe will have us dead and buried by the time he gets around to us." And I grabbed up my hat then, and went out, and walked the streets, until it was time for him to see me.

"Good morning," said Proctor Billings, when I finally went in, getting up cold and polite and deliberate as ever, with a fresh flower in his buttonhole, and a new bouquet in the vase behind him. "Take a seat."

I said how-d'do, and sat down, and held on to myself, waiting for him to start in.

"Will you smoke a cigarette?" he said to me, holding out the gold case again.

It was a regular part of the ceremony, apparently. He always opened with it — like an old-fashioned meal with prayer.

"Not now," said I. "Maybe later."

And he laid the case on the desk where I could reach it.

"Well," said I, starting off to talk again, in spite of myself; "have you looked it over?"

"Yes."

"What'd you think of it?"

"It's a very interesting statement," said Proctor Billings.

"That's what I thought you'd say," I said, encouraged. "So now," I said, "the bank can go ahead, can't it, and straighten us out in this Briscoe thing?"

"No," said Proctor Billings.

"No!" I said. "What do you mean?" I

thought you just said we had a wonderful statement!"

"'Interesting' was what I said," he came back, looking at me.

"Well, interesting then. Isn't it good enough for you to get us out of this?"

"The bank, you mean — as a bank?"

"Why, yes," said I.

"No!"

"Why not?"

"It wouldn't be justified from a legitimate banking standpoint," he said, sending out his cigarette smoke. "We're speaking now about anything we might say about you to Briscoe and Company?" he asked me, raising his eyebrows.

"Yes," said I.

He shook his head. "We couldn't do it," he said, knocking off his cigarette ashes, "under the circumstances."

I sat there for a minute, letting it soak in. And just then this knock came at the door,— that secretary!

"Long distance wants you."

"The same call?"

"Yes."

"Give them the same answer. Tell them I'll call when I come in."

"Yes, sir."

There was this little fine rosebud in his buttonhole. The color of flesh. I kept my eye on that, waiting, while they were talking.

"Briscoe and Company," Billings said to me,

when the man went out. "They've been calling all the morning."

"Now here," I said, stiffening up, when I heard it. I knew it was a matter of minutes now! "You say you can't do anything!"

"As a bank," he said again.

"Not even tell them about that protested check — how it happened."

"We might do that," he said. "Yes. But what good would that be, when old man Briscoe calls me up — as he evidently is doing — and asks me personally what I think about it; your whole situation, and what he'd better do about it?"

"Well," I said, watching him. "What will you say to him — now you've seen that statement?"

"I wouldn't advise him one way or the other."

"That's all you'd do, huh?" said I, getting hot again.

"What else could I do, under the circumstances? What would you do?" he asked, looking over at me, cooler than ever —"if you were in my place in this bank?"

I didn't say anything.

"You wouldn't be here now," he said, "if your condition wasn't critical?"

And my eyes fell down to his rosebud again.

"Well," I said finally, "what's the answer?"

"You've got to have capital!"

"All right," I said, looking him in the eye; "then why don't you loan it to us?"

"As a bank?"

"Yes."

"Because it's not a bank's business to, not a conservative legitimate bank's."

"I thought a bank's business was loaning money?"

"Not to a concern without capital," he came back. "It's the business of somebody else to furnish the first money — the capital that takes the first risk of the enterprise, and gets the profits. That's not a bank's business."

And the talk came to a stop again.

"I don't say," he went along, "you couldn't find some banks that might do it for you — who weren't so old-fashioned and conservative as we are. You might try it," he said, knocking his cigarette ashes off again, "and see."

"Try it, hell!" I said to myself, getting red in the face. With old man Briscoe waiting now on the other end of that wire!

"Let me ask *you* something, for a minute," said I. "You say I can't get capital out of your bank, or any other bank, legitimately. Well, where am I going to get it?"

"The natural way," he said, looking over at me, "would be to get some individual to put it in."

"I see," said I, watching him. "Well, who? Do you know anybody?"

"I can't say that I do."

"Would *you?*" said I, keeping my eyes right on him. "Would you consider it yourself?" And I froze up, waiting for him to answer.

He took his time about it.

"I might, possibly," he said then, looking over. "If it wasn't for one thing."

"What's that?" I came back like lightning.

"I have no intention of forcing myself into the situation."

"Forcing nothing!" I said. "Would you consider it?"

"Under certain circumstances, I might."

"What are they?"

"How much money do you think you ought to have, right now?" he asked me then.

"Twenty thousand dollars."

"Twenty-five might be better, I should imagine," he said. "You should have enough; it's safer."

"All right," I said, jumping right after him. "Now what would you want? How would you fix it?"

"I should have to ask you ten per cent. interest — in the first place," he said.

"All right," I said, and groped my hand out for a cigarette, keeping my eyes on him — to see what was coming next.

"Under the circumstances," he said, his face as still as always.

"That's all right," I said again. "And then what?"

"Control," he said, not moving a muscle.

"Control!" I said, sitting up straighter. I saw it coming now. I saw him reaching out his hand for it — that whole thing that Pasc Thomas and I had bet our lives on — and taking it away from us.

"Control?" said I, standing up. "Control

what? Do you mean to say you want us to hand over the stock majority of our company for twenty-five thousand dollars?"

"Not at all," he said. "I wouldn't consider doing that under present circumstances for a minute. Sit down. Please!"

And I sat.

"Understand, please," he said, still more polite — with those gray eyes of his on me, "I'm merely stating the only conditions I would take up this matter on. At your request."

"Yes," I managed to choke out of myself.

"I wouldn't think of investing money in your concern now, under any condition," he told me. "But I do see, I think, a plan by which I can loan you money, with reasonable safety — for this kind of private venture; and hope to get it back. But to do that the one condition is that I have absolute control of the stock, until my debt is paid, you understand?"

"Yes," said I.

"Is it agreeable to you?"

"Yes."

"Because if it isn't, we'll drop it now."

"It is," I told him.

"When I'm paid, of course," he said, "the control goes back."

"All right," I said, watching. "And what else?"

"I want to be perfectly clear about this," he answered me, looking down, and talking very carefully, "before we go any further. This bank has con-

ducted a legitimate banking business in this city for a great many years. It was established by my father, and run along strictly legitimate banking lines by him. And up to date neither it nor any of its officers have ever taken any of its customers by the throat, and taken their business or their stock away from them. And this arrangement of ours will be made on the same lines — if at all. I'm telling you now the conditions I will come in on. If they are not agreeable to you, you need not consider them at all."

"I understand," I said; "and it's all right. Now go ahead. What other condition is there?"

"I believe," he said, "if your company pulls out — by the aid of my money — I should have an option to buy a certain amount of stock. I should consider myself entitled to it. To buy it — at a price."

"What price?"

"Par, I should say."

"All right," said I; "let's say par for the minute. But how much?"

"A third."

"A third of the stock at par," said I, thinking.

"Giving me the same amount as the other two stockholders," he said. "That's the only basis I'll consider it on."

"Well — all right," I said to him. "How long would you expect the arrangement to run?"

"We could try it for a year, first," he told me; "and see how we stand then."

And I said all right.

"Just one thing more," he said. "We should

understand now; if I do this it may mean a general shake-up; a reorganization from the bottom up — if I think your business needs it."

"How about the running of the shop?" I asked him.

"That's your work — the detail. Though, of course, I should always have the final authority — the *right* to act, until my debt is paid."

"All right," I said. "Go ahead. Cut down, reorganize. I guess we need it, anyhow. Especially financially. We never did claim to know that end of the business."

"Yes, I think I can be of use to you there," said Billings.

"I know you can," said I.

"And now," he said, "I'll have this memorandum drawn up between us, to send to you; and I'll call up Briscoe."

I got up. I saw it was my cue to. And he got up with me, very polite and agreeable.

"I believe," he said, "I can be of use to you in this business — on the financial end anyway. My father used to say," he went on, glancing up again at old man Billings over his head, "'a new business is like a new baby. It's apt to be all right if you can get it through its second summer.' And the finances are where it's most apt to break down. There's where I can be of some use to you, I think. I ought to be. I ought to know something about it," he said, looking up again at the painting of the old man; "I had one of the best teachers in the world."

And he held out his long hand to me.

"I believe you will," said I, looking up with him at that old lean face upon the wall. "You certainly ought to!" I thought to myself.

"I believe we ought to make a strong team," I said, shaking hands. "And there's plenty in it for all of us you'll find."

"I hope so," said he.

I left him standing there, under his picture of his old man, with the bouquet of flowers back of him. And walked out through the still reception room, with the sheep pictures on the wall — feeling better!

There were three or four there, waiting. I noticed one man that I knew.

That pale-faced secretary came out of the side door after I did.

"Just a few minutes, now," he said to this man, who got up, grabbing hard on the rim of his hat, "and Mr. Billings will be able to see you." And he smiled that lower half of a smile again, moving on.

"They all have to come to them," I said to myself. "They have got to come where the money is — sooner or later."

There was something in my hand, I noticed, when I got out on the street. It was that gold monogramed cigarette I'd taken to smoke, all ground up to nothing where I'd been squeezing it.

CHAPTER XII

A MISTAKE

"He held us up, Pasc," I said, talking it over with him that night; "and declared himself in on us. That's the English of it."

"And yet," said Pasc, "if he gets any stock, he's going to pay real money for it — when he might have just made us hand it over."

"I can see why, in a way, too," I came back at him. "He's safer putting in his money this way on a loan, where he can get it out again; and then buy his stock after he sees how good it is. For nothing practically. What's par the way we've got it capitalized now?" I said.

"And if he wants to be crooked, and take it away from us," I said, "all he needs to do is to wait until he gets on to the ropes of the business, and then to work some shenanegan while he has control of the thing — smash it and take it over."

"Why should he do that," Pasc wanted to know, "when he had us in the first place?"

"Clear enough," I told him. "He'd know the business then. And at the same time he'd have the record there of our agreement, to show how fair and aboveboard and proper he was with us."

"Do you know anything to prove that?" Pasc asked me.

"No. I just think so on general principles."

"You're too suspicious, Bill," said Pasc.

"I am with that kind of cattle," said I. "That's the way they get their living. They're trained to, all the time."

"That ain't the way they'll act, in my opinion," said he. "That ain't what I think he's likely to do here."

"What do you think?" I asked.

"I don't think so bad of him as you do," said Pasc—"from what I hear. I think he's sharp. But I don't think he'd cheat you outright. I think he'll do what he thinks has the look of being fair and square in business."

"I God, yes,—in business!" I said. "Business the way his old man did it."

"He seems to think a good deal of his old man, according to you," said Pasc, "and his reputation."

"Well, he's the only one that does," I said—"that I ever heard of. That's just what he'll do. He'll do business like his old man. He'll get you where he wants you first. And then he'll be as kind and soft-hearted as an adding machine—an adding machine," I said, choking up, "crossed with a rattlesnake."

"A little more adding machine wouldn't hurt us in that business very much," said Pasc, "in my opinion. If he starts to reorganize it the way he said he might, it won't be the worst thing that could happen to us."

"There's something in that, Pasc," I had to admit. "I expect we could save a dollar that way now

and then — if we had system. And that wouldn't make me mad, anyway! And anyhow, about all we can do now is to make the best of things. He's got us any way we turn."

"It'll work out all right, I think," said Pasc.

But when Billings started to work it out in detail — that reoganizing business,— it wasn't so agreeable to either Pasc or me especially when it came to cutting out our people we had had with us right along.

That little bookkeeper — that Myrtle — had to go, of course. She was done for, anyway, by that mistake. She never came back to the office after that thing, except to finish cleaning up her desk. In her place Billings put an experienced bookkeeper, a lean, lantern-jawed Scotchman — standing all day, deaf and dumb, hanging over his books, working and getting out statements for Billings himself to work on.

Pretty soon Billings was having me over to the bank to talk about them — and cutting out a man here and there. I put up a fight once or twice, for one or two of them, but he wouldn't have it.

"That's what ruins most businesses — making it a personal matter. My father always told me," he said, looking up again at his picture: "'business isn't friendship; it's arithmetic. The multiplication table plays no favorites,' he used to say. 'And in the long run a business doesn't, either; for if it does, there won't be any business.'"

So finally I went off and did what he told me.

One of the first things he run across, of course,

was Chuck — that boy of Tom's. We had had him on the payroll, most of the year, riding for us and training, ever since he won that first race.

"Who is this man?" Proctor Billings asked me. "Just what does he do?"

So I told him. "He isn't riding all the time," I said. "But he isn't very high-priced, comparatively; and we've always figured it paid us well in advertising."

"I see," said Billings. "Well, I'd like to look into it — to see just what he does produce for us.

"I've looked it up," he said, a day or two later, "and I'm pretty clear that it doesn't pay. Racing has had its day as advertising. He isn't bringing his money back. We'll have to let him go."

"But we can't let him go!" said I.

"Why not?"

"Why, he *made* us, in a way," I said. And then I told him just what he'd done for us.

"I see," said Billings, thinking it over. "Well, I tell you what you can do. You can let another man go, and give him a place inside the shop — if you want to. I should think it might be better for him, than this irregular traveling around the country, racing."

And he put it up to me to do.

I never felt rottener about anything in my life. It didn't mean anything to Billings, of course. We weren't human beings to him, any of us; nothing more than cogs in the machinery — figures in a column. But I knew myself just how the kid would take it.

He didn't say a word, when I was telling him about it — just sat there, chewing gum now and then, and looking up with his head down a little, with the whites showing under those hard blue eyes of his.

I told him I was sorry, but we'd made up our minds we'd have to give up racing. "But I can give you just about as much money there, inside," I said. "Or it will be as soon as you get started."

He didn't say anything for a minute. Just sat there with those sulky eyes on me.

"I know how you feel about it, probably," I told him. "But I'd advise you to take it. You can't tell when this racing might blow up. And this here would be a steady thing for you — a life job, if you wanted it. And I'll be here — always — to look out for you."

"Ah-ha?" he said, looking at me with a little crooked smile on his lips. "Well, I guess I won't take it. Just as much obliged."

"Why not?" I came back at him. That look on his face made me a little sore.

"How about you?" he said. "Would you want to go back in the shop?"

"That ain't the question," I said, getting hotter. He had a different way with him than he used to — older and sulkier and more devil-may-care. "The question is do *you* want this job I'm offering you? It's a good job!" said I, watching him.

"Maybe," he said. "But it's not my job. That ain't what I'm cut out for; I'm a rider, not a mechanic."

"All right," I said, "that's your lookout." He

had me mad now — the way he said it, as much as what he said. That smart Aleck, indifferent way kids talk nowadays, when they're trying to show how independent they are. "The time may come," I said, "you won't turn up your nose at a good job as a machinist."

It was true enough, too, what I told him. But I felt meaner than a dog, saying it — and mad at the same time!

"Anyway," I said. "There it is. I've offered it to you."

"Don't worry about me," he said, starting chewing gum; working his jaws and looking up at me. "I can place myself all right. The Rajah people have been after me for six months — for more money than you gave me. But I turned them down right along.

"I turned them down," he said, getting up. "I thought I'd take my chances and stay on with you here. I thought maybe you wanted me to. But this is different!"

He turned around, and went out. He had changed a lot in a few months — grown quite a little, and got a lot cockier, and surer of himself, knocking around the country, winning races that way. He was a pretty wise boy by this time; and his success at riding had given him a swelled head. I didn't care for him a whole lot. But that didn't let me out from what I owed him.

"It couldn't be helped, I suppose," I said to Pasc; "but I never felt meaner over a little thing in my life than letting him go."

"And of course you couldn't tell the boy how it was — how it was forced on us," said Pasc. "It certainly was a mean job — for you," he told me.

But the women took it the hardest of anybody. The whole thing had been a kind of family affair with us before that; we talked about the people at the office and the shop, when we got home, always. The place those days was always what Billings claimed a business shouldn't ever be — run on a kind of personal basis.

"Did-didn't he *make* you?" said Polly, flaring up when she heard about it. Did-didn't he give you your first big start — what he did in that race?"

"I never denied it," said I.

"I thought — I thought that was one thing you always claimed," she kept after me. "I — I thought you always made your boasts — that whatever anybody did for you, you always paid them back; especially if they stood by you and did you a favor."

"We offered him a job," said I.

"Yes — yes. What kind of a job!" said she. "He's right. He's a rider; not a mechanic."

"He could have changed."

"Changed," she said. "So could you! What harm would it have done to keep him? Tell me. He'd have made something for you as advertising, wouldn't he?"

"Probably he would."

"How — how much would you have lost all together?"

"I don't know."

"I don't either," said Polly. "What you did, in my opinion; you lost money by — by letting him go — besides doing a mean thing, throwing him out."

"Well, it's done anyhow," I said. "We won't talk about it any more."

You can't explain a thing like that to a woman, anyhow. And I wasn't going to bring in Billings too strong, and throw it all off on him — even in my own family. I don't believe in that kind of business; especially when he was probably right about the thing anyway.

But Zetta, Pasc's wife, was the worst when she heard about it. She wouldn't speak to me for a week or two, until Pasc convinced her I wasn't to blame for it personally. And then she had the boy around to her house for dinner, just to show him what she thought about it. She was an Indian that way. She did exactly what she thought she was entitled to, and the devil himself couldn't stop her, when she once got started.

"Why wouldn't I?" she said to me, when I brought it up. "He's just as good as we are, as far as I know. Or Proctor Billings, for that matter!" she said, getting red. "And a little better in this thing, I should say, if anybody asked me. The only thing to be said for us, we're in line for a little more money some day. That's the only difference. Why shouldn't I have him up to dinner, if I want to?"

"You should — probably," I said, dropping it — feeling raw and uncomfortable about the whole thing still.

"I stand by my friends," she said.

"I do myself, sometimes!" I answered, getting sore.

"But that's the way business goes, I expect," I said to Pasc, when we were alone, "if you're going to run it and make money. You can't run it on personal lines, the way the women would like to. You've got to operate your business according to the laws of arithmetic — as old Billings said, or you won't have any to run."

"Up to a certain point!" said Pasc.

"And if a man don't earn his money, all there is, he's got to go."

"Yes. That's the idea," said Pasc, in a kind of a dry way. "That's the rule that'll work out with all of us before we're done with it, probably."

"Let it," I said. "I'm not afraid of it. And anyhow," I said, "you've got to admit the business is working out well, under Billings, so far as making money goes. It's getting down into shape now; even you and I can see that."

"From that standpoint it's all right, I believe, from the standpoint of making money," said Pasc.

"Well, that don't hurt your feelings any, does it?" said I. "It don't mine. I'm beginning to believe that in some ways getting Billings in here was the best thing that ever happened to the business. You and I could never have organized it in the world."

"No, we couldn't, I guess," said Pasc, running his hand over his forehead. He was getting kind of

anxious and bony looking lately. I'd noticed it before. We were speeding up pretty fast in the shop.

Billings was certainly getting it organized now; that was one sure thing. That deaf-and-dumb Scotchman he had on the books was a wonder. "He sleeps with them," I said. "And eats figures for lunch, with a small glass of water on the side."

There wasn't a word out of him scarcely. He was working with his eyes down, all day. And by this time — after three months or so — Billings had got in his brother — a machinist — to work in with him on the shop management, as Pasc's assistant. The two of them — those brothers — were always around, working, saying nothing.

"You couldn't ask for a better man," said Pasc, about the one helping him. "He's always picking up something I've forgotten. Or catching some mistake, or stopping some waste. He earns *his* money, that's certain. He's great on system, just where I'm weak."

I began to feel around in my mind then, wondering just why it was Billings thought he'd better put him in there in the shop.

Pasc had the shop end, of course. And I had the general management, especially of sales — going out and meeting the trade and selling the goods. That was my line naturally. When it came to selling machines and handling the trade, I was there. I didn't take a back seat for anybody. I liked it. I could eat it up.

But I could see, every now and then, that Pasc's

end was worrying him — especially with the speed we were getting on now, since Billings came in.

"We thought we were going pretty fast before," he said, sitting there at night, drawing his hand over his forehead. "But it was nothing like this."

He looked thinner than a rail; and those pale eyes further down in back of his cheek bones than ever.

"How do *you* stand it?" he said to me.

"Fine," I said. "I just bite into it. I feel like a fighting cock every day — except now and then my stomach goes back on me out on the road."

"I don't know just what's struck me," he said.

"What's that?" I asked him.

"I get these headaches all the time."

"Your digestion, probably," I said. "That's the matter with me, nine times out of ten; when I've got one, my stomach's out of whack."

"Well, maybe you're right," said Pasc. "But half of the time I feel like Tunket. I worry about my work a good deal," he said —"the responsibility of it. I don't sleep so terribly well nights — especially when a new idea strikes me. The way it is then, I get my work here driving me around all day; and a carburetor or a cam shaft chasing me all night. Between the two, they're running me thin."

"Cut out the nights," said I.

"I guess I'll have to — or the days, one or the other," said Pasc.

But that Scotchman, that McAdam, who had come in as his assistant, didn't worry much, or have any reason to. Everything went like machinery

with him; as if he was just one wheel in the shop. I used to watch him around there, coming up always in the next place he was wanted, as if a cam operated him.

"Why don't you throw more of the detail off on to him?" I said to Pasc.

But he didn't want to do that. He was too conscientious. If he only had, things might have turned differently, perhaps. But yet, I don't know either. The pace was getting pretty fast for him.

The first I knew that anything out of the way had happened was one night, when I was getting ready to go; and Pasc came in and sat down waiting, until after that bookkeeping McAdam had gone out finally.

He sat there, staring off across the room. He hadn't washed up, even.

"What ails you, Pasc?" I said, waking up to it after awhile. "Why don't you change and wash up and go home? What's the new wrinkle you've got on your mind now?"

And then he gave a kind of a groan.

"What's the matter, anyhow?" I asked him. "Another headache?"

"No."

"What is it?" I said. I saw then there was something serious going on.

"By misery!" he said. "I've made an awful bull."

"What?"

"I spoiled about three thousand dollars' worth of stuff, I should say."

"Cripes, Pasc," I said, sitting up and taking notice. "How did you come to do that?"

"Counting labor," he said.

And then he explained to me. It was that last improvement in the engine, he told me.

"That last one that was going to improve the intake one hundred percent?"

"Yes."

"Didn't it?" I said. "Didn't it work out when you got it in the engine? Have you got to take it all out again?"

"The idea was all right," he said. "I've gone over it since, with the one I put up myself, but the trouble is, they put it in all wrong. They spoiled it making it."

"How did that happen?" said I, staring at him.

"I don't know, exactly," said Pasc. "I suppose it was because I wasn't around all the time to superintend them. But it never occurred to me," he said to me, talking lower, "it never entered my head that any man who pretended to be a machinist could make such a condemned, ridiculous mistake as those two men did."

"What did you do — fire 'em, on the spot?"

"No," he said. "McAdam wanted to, but I wouldn't have it. I told him it was on me. And it was, too. It wouldn't have happened if I'd stayed there, where I'd ought to have been, instead of mooning around on something else."

"Where were you — anyhow?"

"Off somewhere, I expect — working out that next idea that struck me at my bench."

"God, Pasc," I said. "How could you do it! A thing like that — just now, especially!"

"It'll be over, rather than under three thousand, I expect," he said.

And he got up slowly, and began to take off his overalls and get some of the smudge off of his face. And finally he started on home, going out with his head down.

When I was following after him, a little later, I ran across McAdam, that assistant of his, going later than I was even; forever there, peering around the corner — snooping around, saying nothing.

"I guess I'll go tomorrow and tell Billings about this thing myself," I made up my mind. "I guess that will be safer. He'd get it from one of those two spies of his, anyhow."

He took it entirely different from what I expected — just raised his eyebrows, and said it was too bad. And then dropped it.

"After all," I said to myself, going away, "what could he say anyhow — the way things are going with us now? If we keep showing profits the way we are?"

And yet that didn't convince me really. I never could feel easy and secure with him.

CHAPTER XIII

A SHARP CORNER

I used to sit around thinking things over as we came towards the end of the year that that first agreement with Proctor Billings had to run.

"What's the matter with you?" Pasc asked me, catching me sitting there, figuring in the office.

"Nothing. Why?"

"You're sitting around, brooding like a sick man, or an inventor trying to hatch out a new idea out of his mind," said Pasc, smiling that little old dry smile of his.

"I'm worried, if you want to know," I said. "About what'll happen when that agreement runs out."

"Worried!" said Pasc. "I thought we were making a lot of money."

"We are," I told him. "We're going to show profits of sixty thousand dollars this year."

"Billings ought to be satisfied with that."

"That's what I'm afraid of," I said. "Too well satisfied!"

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know," I said, "exactly. But there's something up. I don't know just what it is. But it's something!"

"What makes you think so?" said Pasc.

"Oh, a number of things," I said. "The way Billings acts for one thing — so very polite, and reserved, and particular!"

"Probably you just imagined it," said Pasc.

"No, I didn't," I told him. "And those McAdams — those still sneaks of his, always around, always busy! What are they in here for, anyway? We got along without them before. You can't move around in your own office, and pull out a paper from the drawer, but you know one of them has his eyes on you. Between Billings and them, it seems sometimes as if we were surrounded by these still-faced things, day and night."

"They're good men, at that," said Pasc.

"I hate them," I said. "They ain't half so human as a spider."

"You distrust them too much," said Pasc, "naturally. You're too different from them. They're good people for the work — those Scotchmen."

"Yes — for that kind of work," I said, "I guess. But I tell you what I think they're here for," I told him, "if you want to know. I have for some time. I think they're in here to learn the business all around — so if Proctor Billings wanted to, any time, he get along without us!"

"He wouldn't do that," said Pasc.

"Why wouldn't he?" I asked him. "That's what I meant just now, when I said we were making too much money; it's too much temptation for him!"

"I know," said Pasc. "But if we are making so much, how could he get the business away, if he wanted to?"

"The same answer as always from the start. Capital. Money. For every dollar we show in profits, three and four and five have to go in there in capital. We showed sixty thousand dollars' profit this last year, and we're in debt one hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars more than when it started!"

"Seven times what you expected you'd need!"

"Yes," I said —"that Billings is responsible for. The way he's fixed it! We haven't moved an inch, when you come down to it. He's got us surer than he ever had. We never in the world could get the money this business would have to get, if he shut down on us now."

"But he won't," said Pasc. "He won't do that sort of thing."

"I don't know," I said. "I'm worried. There's something coming up. He's going to spring something on us, I know. Just the way he acts. And if he wanted to, he could dump us out of this — both of us — as easy as emptying a basket."

I could see just the minute I went in that still back office of the bank that morning when the agreement was coming up, that I was right — that there was something coming — just from that calm deliberate way Billings got up to meet me with.

He sat down by the cut flowers from his greenhouse under the old man's picture, after we shook hands. He was great on shaking hands. All those bank men are. Then he sat, taking his time, looking over the statement of our year, waiting for me to start up — the old game.

"Well," I said, "coming to it finally, "it's not so *darned* bad, is it? Sixty-one thousand dollars for the year."

"No, it isn't," he said, putting up his eyebrows, and turning over the pages with those white fingers, pretending to be reading one part and another.

"No," he said, laying it down. "It's pretty good."

"You bet it is," I said.

"In a way —"

"In a way!" said I. "It's six per cent. of a million dollars." I'd been saying that to Pasc, when we were first feeling good over it — kind of half in earnest and half a joke.

"If you want to look at it that way," he answered me. And stopped. And I waited for him, this time. "But I should say that was just a little premature!"

"Premature?" I said after him.

"To talk of it as interest on fixed capital."

"What would you call it then?"

"A first year's earnings, wouldn't you? A good year. If principal grew so easily as that, we'd all be millionaires around here, out of the bicycle business!"

And he smiled that thin smile of his.

"Maybe we would," I said.

"No," he went on, pulling out another cigarette for himself and pounding the end of it on the desk. "That's one trouble here."

"What?"

"The bicycle business. If it wasn't for that, I wouldn't be so afraid of this."

"Afraid!" I said after him.

"Yes — of the capital it's eating up."

His face was still as a wall. I moved my chair. I saw he was getting around to it — getting started on this first move.

"A hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars," he said, reading it off the statement. "Quite a little money to be responsible for, personally — if anything should happen."

"Nothing's going to happen," I said.

"How do you know?" he asked me. "Any more than in the bicycle business. Yes," he said again, when I didn't say anything. "That's it, I'm *afraid!*"

"That's your way of putting it," I said, coming back at him.

"It's my money," he said. "Or I'm responsible for it." And we stopped there — waiting.

I looked up for a second, and saw the face of the old man, in the oil painting over me — looking down on the same old still-faced game again, he'd played there himself when he was alive.

"Look here," I said to Billings. "You haven't got anything to scare you yet — not much. With our earnings for the year — put it the worst way you want to."

"It leaves me," he said, "with the responsibility of one hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars, instead of twenty-five. Seven times what I was led to expect."

That was one for me — of course.

"Seven times what we first estimated," he repeated again. He said "we"; what he meant, of course, was "you."

"Some of it," I came back, "was transferred from the supply people."

"Yes, but I'm responsible, just the same."

I stopped — waiting for his next move. It came right away.

"But that isn't the worst, of course. That isn't what I'm afraid of most."

"What is?" said I, watching him with all my eyes.

"The future," he said. "Do you know what you'll need next year?" he asked me, putting those hard eyes of his on mine for a second.

"Not exactly, no."

"At least two hundred thousand dollars more!"

I didn't say anything. I knew it was probably true.

"You should have a factory, for one thing. You need more room. And you could save, probably, ten dollars a machine, if you had a real factory — properly arranged."

"Easy," I told him.

"Where is it all coming from?" he asked me. "If the company was old enough; if it had a record of earnings to show, you could capitalize it — take it to New York, and dispose of some stock. That's no use now. We'll have to place its paper — if I can manage it, as I have in the past."

"Look here," I said, getting restless finally. "What's all this leading to?"

"I suppose," he said, "to taking up the renewal of our agreement."

"All right," I said, "go ahead."

I wasn't going to let him drag the thing along this way forever.

"If you want to do it," said he, looking at me, extra polite.

"Certainly I want to," said I. "Don't you?"

"I don't know," he said.

"Don't know!" said I, turning chilly.

"No," he said, and his voice kept getting harder and his face more stiff. "I don't. I don't know that I do want to, as a matter of fact — except under certain pretty clearly defined circumstances."

"What are they?" said I.

We both sat — going carefully — watching each other in that still room; the old man's picture over us, and the smell of the hothouse roses in the vase, filling up the place like a funeral.

He took his time about telling me what he wanted.

"Go ahead," I said. "What are the conditions? What would you want?" I was getting nervous.

"In the first place," he said, "I should expect to retain my option — to buy in my interest in the company at the price we first agreed upon.

"That's all right," I said, sitting up and watching every move he was making. It made you laugh, on the side, to think what the cost of the stock was then — compared to what it was worth now. Prac-

tically nothing! But that was done, anyhow. "Go ahead," said I.

"And I should want a voting control of the stock, as I have now, until the obligations to me were paid up."

"Go ahead," said I. That was clear enough. It didn't change the situation from what it had been — either of those things. "Go ahead." I saw what he was really after was still coming.

"That we can take for granted," he said, "I suppose." And I nodded to him.

"But the main thing — for me," he said, and drew out this paper from his pocket —"is all here in a new plan for capitalization I've drawn up — to show you."

"What is it?" I said, sitting up and taking notice. This was something new to me. We were capitalized, of course; like everybody else is. But I had only the haziest kind of the general idea of this stock game. I sat up; I was afraid of it — darned shy, the minute he started opening it up.

"I'll show you the whole thing in detail," he said, "if you like."

He had it all worked out, of course, as I knew he had. But the first thing he said nearly knocked me over.

"I should capitalize it," he said, "at a million and a half dollars."

"A million and a half," I said. "What do you mean? Didn't you say it was no use talking in such figures as a million dollars!"

"What difference does it make?" he said, look-

ing at me, "what figure you capitalize it for? If it earns it — all right. It's all capitalized. If it doesn't earn it, who's hurt — but just three stockholders?"

"Nobody, I suppose," I said.

But just the same it made an impression on me. He passed it off. But it looked to me to be at least a sign of what he thought there might be in it.

"A million and a half," he went along, "for convenience. I put it there in the first place, because of there being three stockholders."

"Go ahead," said I, watching this new game, hard.

"But all that million and a half," he told me then, "would not be in one class of stock."

"How would it be?" I asked him, eyeing that face of his.

"Half a million preferred; and a million common."

"How's that?"

"A million common, with voting power," he said.

"Voting power!" I said over to myself. "Now we're getting to it!"

"Controlled equally between you and me."

"And the other half million preferred?"

"For Mr. Thomas," he said.

"What's this?" said I, jumping at it.

"That's one absolute condition," he said, turning those still eyes of his on me, "of my going on."

"What?"

"If I go on with you — with more money, and a new factory — it will be under a change of manage-

ment of the plant. Mr. Thomas will have to give up his part in the concern; and his voice in the stock control."

He didn't move a muscle as he said it.

"What are you talking about?" I said to him. "Do you know?"

I had just as much expected a club across the face.

"I know very well," he said, cutting out his words clear and sharp. "I'm through with any concern that Mr. Thomas is in control of turning out the product. He'll have to go."

"Let him go!" I said, getting my breath back. "Put Pasc Thomas out of the Hoodlum! What are you — crazy? Why, it's his thing! He made it!"

"Yes, and he'll ruin it, if he'll ever have a chance of manufacturing it on a large scale, after the way he's been doing. Besides," said Billings, "I wouldn't go into any company, permanently, without expecting to have at least half of the stock anyway."

I almost choked to death while he was saying it.

"Now wait," he said, holding out his hand, when he saw me opening up my mouth again. "Before you make any comments on my plan, it'll be just as well to let me explain it, so you'll know what it is. That is," he said, staring at me again —"if you want me to go on with you."

I sat and listened as he told me to. I began now to get an idea of the thing.

"To start with," he went on, when I sat back and waited, "I have no desire on earth to underestimate

Mr. Thomas, or do him the slightest injustice. He is an excellent man — in his place."

It made me wriggle in my chair to hear him, passing judgment on Pasc Thomas running a machine shop! I wanted to get up and eat him raw. But I didn't. I sat and took it — getting chillier every minute, understanding his scheme.

"As an inventor," he said, "he is a very able man. On the other hand, he's just the type of man who should never have charge of a manufacturing plant — or a voice in its management."

"What makes you say that?" I asked him, keeping my voice down. "That mistake he made?"

"That, and a hundred other things. He's entirely unfitted for it. He's worse than that. He's dangerous. At the same time," he went along, "he invented the machine — he made the company possible, as you say. And he should certainly have his share of the profits from it. He can be of great use, too, in the future."

I sat glaring at him, holding in.

"So I have worked out this plan for him — to protect his rights," he said. "I'm giving him the first chance on earnings. My plan will give him three hundred thousand dollars in seven per cent. preferred stock."

"Three hundred thousand dollars," I said, "I thought you said five."

"There would be two hundred thousand dollars left in the treasury, and two hundred thousand dollars common," he said, "to issue in emergency. And three hundred thousand dollars would give Mr.

Thomas twenty-one thousand dollars a year, before we declared ourselves any dividends on our stock.

" For the present," he went on, " it would not be likely that we would pay dividends even on preferred stock. And in that period, we could allow Mr. Thomas a salary, a good living salary, say seventy-five hundred dollars a year, to be given up, when we decided to pay preferred dividends. And in the meantime, he could come and go as he wanted — invent what he pleased, and let us have his inventions.

" In this way," he said, " you and I would be left in active control of the company as equal owners of the stock with the voting power."

" And pay ourselves good, fat salaries, I suppose," said I.

" We'd pay ourselves properly," he told me.

" How much? "

" Oh, say fifteen thousand dollars a year."

Then he stopped a minute, and waited and let it sink in. And it did, all right. I got it. I didn't have to be told what he could do, if he called for his money from the Company.

" I think that is about the substance of the plan," he said, fingering the bottom of the vase, where his hothouse flowers were, " as it came to me, trying to work out a fair arrangement for every one. I knew, of course, it might not appeal to you, personally," he said, looking up. " But of course," he said, staring me in the eye, " that's your option — whether you do it or not."

It certainly was a fine option.

"Who would you have managing the shop in the place of Mr. Thomas?" I said, still holding in till I got it all.

"Mr. McAdam — his assistant — under you," he answered. "You would be president and I treasurer."

"I see," said I.

"You would take the business and I the financial end."

"I see," I said again.

I did — as plain as if it had already happened. He in the bank managing it — under absolute control until his debt was paid off; I working for him, under guard by those slink-eyed spies of his — those McAdams, until he'd got what he wanted out of me — as he had now out of Pasc. I working, day after day, with that still-faced, cold-handed crowd watching me, till they got what they wanted out of me. Then another banker's trick; another shift, and they'd slip the knife into me in the dark, and I'd be out in the street with Pasc. And this still-faced thing, with his still agents, were to have the whole concern we'd made in his own hands, permanently.

And then I broke loose. "So that's it," I came out finally, getting red in the face.

"That's what?" he asked me.

"That's what you've been sitting around cooking up the last few months. It's a fine scheme — you've got it down fine! In the first place, you and I get together and put Pasc Thomas down, and take his invention and his property away from him."

I saw him get a little white, when I said that, in spite of himself.

"By Cripes," I said, this thing striking me all of a sudden — what he was trying to do! "What do you take me for? What do I look like to you — a man that will double-cross his best friend — for the sake of a few dollars? Or a million, either!" I said. "For I'm inclined to think now you see something in this — something bigger than I thought even! What do you think I am, a crook?"

"You needn't make quite so much noise — unless you feel you must," said Proctor Billings, giving me an ugly look. It was a queer thing to see. The hotter and redder I got, the colder and stiller he was.

"I'll make what noise I want to," I said. "If you made a little more noise, occasionally," I told him, "moving around, people would trust you a little more. There's worse things in a man than noise, I've found."

And he sat still.

"That's the first thing," I went along. "Pasc Thomas goes; and I stay. I and you and the other still-faced boys you'll keep around me in the factory — watching. And when the time comes, and you get what you want out of me — out I go on the sidewalk, flipped out, with another banker's trick. And there we'll be. Thomas and I out in the cold. And you with the property.

"I like that," I said. "That'd be a fine thing for me! Oh, no. I'm not much. But I'm too wise for that. I know I can't go up against the game that

you still-faced boys in the bank can work up; not alone, anyway!"

"Wait," said Billings, breaking in on me. I could see from his voice and his face that he was white mad. White and still and dangerous. "It isn't necessary to bawl," he told me, "or insult me. All you have to do is to withdraw from our arrangement — and finance yourself elsewhere."

"Yes," I said. "In other words, you'll shut down on us, and demand your money."

"You can put it that way, if you like," he said. "I should probably want my money when it came due."

"And if you didn't get it, I suppose, you'd take the business, eh?"

"I would try and take care of my claim," he said.

He had it all worked out, all right. He had us, if he went ahead and demanded his money now. I saw that as well as anybody. But I wasn't in any condition to admit it then.

"All right," I said. "Go ahead. Have a try — grab it, if you think you can! But you'll have one of the prettiest little fights you ever had, before you get through. I'll promise you that.

"Now you begin to see how big it is," I said. I was crazy, thinking of what he was trying to do. "You're going to strangle us, till our tongues hang out, huh?" I said, shaking my fist in his face. "You're going to take it away from us. Go ahead. Try it! Try it!"

"But there's one thing," he said to me, when I

stopped, cold and quiet as if I hadn't spoken at all, " you'll have to remember."

" What's that? "

" You haven't the entire decision in this matter — yourself."

" What do you mean by that? " I asked him.

" I mean you don't control the stock now, as I understand it."

And I stood gaping at him, wondering what he had up his sleeve now. " There's another man who owns half of it, isn't there? " he asked me.

" Pasc Thomas! " I said.

" Yes."

" Pasc Thomas! " I said again, and burst out laughing. " He'll throw himself out, I suppose," I said, " of the thing he cares more for than anything else on earth."

But it made no impression on him. He stood there, looking, his face motionless.

" If I were you," said Proctor Billings, " I would wait and find out what he says, before you decide definitely to commit financial suicide."

CHAPTER XIV

REORGANIZED

I went back to Pasc Thomas at the factory, frothing at the mouth.

"You know what the game is? Do you know what that crook is trying to do?" I said, when I got him off by himself, where those two McAdams — those spies of Billings — couldn't overhear us.

"No. What?" said Pasc, sitting staring, with his long hands hanging on his knees.

"He wanted me to go in with him, and freeze you out."

"You don't mean that!" said Pasc.

"I'll show you what he did," said I. And I told him just exactly what the scheme was. The further I got with it, the stiller he sat looking off.

"Do you see it now?" I said, when I got through.

"I don't know as I do," he said, coming back to earth for a minute.

"Why not? It's as plain as the nose on your face," I told him. "He gets his line on the business — and sees there's a fortune in it. Then he gets these two fellows, these two sneaks, these slink-eyed Scotchmen, into the factory. And the minute he thinks he knows it — he's got it learned enough — out comes that long white hand and grabs it."

"He didn't want you to get out," said Pasc.

"No. He needed me for the present. He hasn't got the selling end learned yet," said I. "But he'll get me some way, when he's ready — or he thinks he can, anyway — by sitting back and cooking up some other crooked trick, and springing it on me when the time comes."

"I don't know about that either," said Pasc, talking lower and lower, the louder I talked.

"Well, I do," I said, "it's you go now — and next me — and then he gets it all. That's the program. We all go out one by one till he gets it.

"Oh, no," I said. "No. I can see through a millstone. He thinks he's got us now, where the hair's short, where we don't dare to fight. But there's where he fools himself. He's going to have the warmest fight he ever had yet, before he gets this; he's going to hear from —"

And all at once I looked up and I realized Pasc wasn't paying the slightest attention to me; just sat looking off.

"What's the matter with you?" I said, stopping short. "Are you sick — or what?"

"No," he said, starting up and catching himself, and coming back to earth again.

"What does ail you then? Aren't you interested? What are you thinking of — staring off like that?"

"I think," said Pasc finally, clearing his throat, "I think he's right!"

"Right!" said I, going up into the air. "Who? Proctor Billings? What do you mean? Oh, I see.

You mean he's got it figured out right. That we can't get away from him any way? Well, if —"

"No," said Pasc. "That ain't what I mean."

"What is it, then? What do you?"

"No," he said, talking slow. "I think he's right — about the whole thing."

"Right!" I yelled.

"I've got to get out. But you'll stay."

"Get out," I yelled again. "You? Well — I guess not! And he can't force you out either! You get out," I said, "of the company? Why?"

"I believe it will be the only sensible thing to do; I'm not fitted for it, just as he says."

"Sensible!" I said, watching him close — to see whether he was crazy or I was. "Fitted! What do you mean by that? Who's to be the judge of that — a man like Proctor Billings, who's walked through a machine shop three times with chamois gloves on?"

"He's right," said Pasc again.

"He's nothing of the kind," I came back. "What are you talking about?"

"But it's more than that," said Pasc, going along in a kind of level voice.

"More," said I. "What does that mean?"

"It means," he said, "it's happened just right for me. Almost providential." And I sat there, watching him with my eyes hanging out on my cheeks. "The fact is," said Pasc, "I've got to quit, anyhow!"

"Quit!"

"I ain't been very well all the spring," he told me.

"Those headaches?"

"Yes. There hasn't been a day for the last three months I haven't had one of those condemned things splitting my head open. And now lately the doctor's been giving me warning I've got to quit."

"Why didn't you tell me about it?" I asked him.

"Oh, I don't know," said Pasc, looking off. "What good would it do? We couldn't either of us stop, the way we were fixed. Though occasionally," he said, "I did have to knock off and go home, when you were away; and leave McAdam in charge."

"I'll bet you —" I said, stopping, thinking.

"What?"

"That's how Billings heard it," I said — "about you being willing to get out."

"Probably so," said Pasc.

And then we sat still a minute. It was an awful thump to me!

"Was he pretty positive about it?" I asked him.

"Who?"

"The doctor."

"Yes; he said I'd got to quit, or there'd be trouble. There is some now. But not so dangerous, if I quit right away." And he sat still a minute longer, letting that soak in.

I wouldn't have it. I couldn't make myself believe it.

"I don't believe it's anything, anyhow," I said, "but just your stomach. I know from experience. I can always trace it back to that."

"No, that ain't it with me — these headaches that I have, so the doctor says," Pasc told me.

"What is?"

"It's nerves. Nerves exhausted," said Pasc. "But that ain't my theory of it, either. I think I can go back further than that."

"To what?" said I.

"Like half the folks, nowadays —"

"What's that?"

"Speed," said Pasc, smiling that old quick smile again. "Speed. I ain't geared up for this kind of thing — this last year or two. It's got going too many revolutions a minute for me — about the way it did with that Myrtle, and her bookkeeping."

"Don't be a damn fool, Pasc," said I, "comparing yourself to her."

"I mean it," he said. "We've got speeded up too fast lately for human beings, I believe. You can stand it, maybe; I thought I could," he said, looking at me the way envious sick folks look at well ones, "But I can't. You don't mind it at all, do you?"

"No," I told him. "It's meat and drink for me. I can take all they give me. And I believe myself there's something else the matter with you, besides work, if the truth was told. You're naturally tough. I still believe there's something else behind, in spite of what your doctor says."

"Maybe there is," said Pasc, opening up one of those sudden grins of his again. "Maybe Zetta's got it right. She always claims the trouble with me is carburetor on the brain.

"That is my trouble, too, in a way," he said, "and

always has been, from a boy — getting thinking, some idea riding me around in my head. It sounds like a dumb idiot to hear another man tell it, but I get an idea on my mind, and I can't shake it off. It comes in and takes possession of me. And I can't do anything at all, after that, but sit thinking, thinking. And it's worse, of course, when you're tired out. Your brain gets loose then; you lose control of it, and it goes following the thing around like a hound. Like a foxhound," he said, "you have to go home and leave at the night fall. And you hear him sometimes — waking up — going following, tireder and tireder, all night long. Nights are the worst," he said, pushing his long brown stringy hair back from his old wrinkled forehead.

"I guess I'm no different," he went along, thinking, "from a lot of folks in our lines — around machine shops, thinking out improvements. You see them, all over. You can spot them as far as you can see. Only, I struck this thing that went so well it kept me jumping nights and days both. And nights and days are too much for me."

"So you think you've got to go?" said I, after quite a while, thinking it over.

"Yes."

"I God," I said. "I can't get used to it!" And I got up and stood at the window.

"I can't," said Pasc.

"I always sort of felt we'd keep going along together — always," I said, after awhile.

"So did I, Bill," he answered me.

And we both stayed still for a minute or two. I

stood watching out the window at a couple of dogs, and a comic opera singer on a billboard across the road.

"This thing was our baby, Pasc," I said to him — when I thought I wanted to. "We fathered it and mothered it, and sat up nights; and lugged it around, and sweat blood and cussed over it."

"I know it," said he.

And we shut up again. I looked around for a second. He sat there hunched up, with his long hands and wrists hanging down, and those pale-blue eyes, staring off, forty miles in back of nowhere.

"But I guess there's no getting around it now," he said finally. "I guess it's got to be.

"I've got to go off and get built up again. Get rid of this thing gnawing in my head — or get it worked out. Somebody's got to work it out!" he said, sitting up a little, and clamping those far-off, absent-minded eyes back on mine again. "Before long, somebody's got to work out a carburetor on an entirely different principle from now, with the grade of gasoline going down the way it is — if we're going to keep going on."

I had to smile to hear him — after he'd just been saying he'd have to give it all up.

"Keep going on," I said. "What do you care? You got yours. You ain't responsible for keeping the world going on, are you?"

"No," he said, staring back, "I don't suppose I am, more than anybody else. But I have to just the same — keep going on with it, like the rest of the folks, whether I want to or not. And with this

thing,— now, this carburetor thing I've got on my mind — I guess I'm about like the fellow when that old Thirteen-Fourteen Puzzle was going; the one they said locked himself up in a room, fighting it; and told them, if he didn't come out alive with the answer, they could bury them both together.

"But I'm on the right track now, I believe," he said, brightening up a little. "I'm on an idea now that's a hundred per cent. better than anything they've got yet."

I had all I could do to keep from laughing.

"No," he went along, not noticing me, "I've got a queer job for the rest of my life, apparently. I've got to go off and get my health back; and fight this thing on my brain. I'll have all the money I'll need, apparently — and more, too, if what you say is true."

"You're a funny duck, that way, ain't you?" I said to him. "You never did care a whole lot for money."

"No, I never was very ambitious that way, I guess," he told me.

"You're just the opposite from me," said I.

"I don't know but what I am."

"Just the opposite," I told him. "I'm out for the coin, with the rest of them. I'm out for the almighty dollar. They can talk about the evils of it, and all that, and how they'd go without it; but I notice there's none of them ever refuse it when it comes their way. It may be an evil, but no man ever got heart disease yet trying to run away from it.

"And if you're out, Pasc," said I; "if you think you've got to be — it puts a little different look on this business for me. In the past, working it together, it's been a kind of pet and hobby with me. A kind of part of us. Our own business! But now with you out, and me going on with Proctor Billings, it's all changed to me. It's dog eat dog. From this time on I'm out for the spondulax — for all there is in it. I'm out for big money! To hell with the business — except for what you can turn it into. I'll work this thing like Billings and the rest of them — on the basis of the multiplication table, no favors asked or given.

"If that's the game," I said —"and I guess it is — I can play it with the next one. Let him try on some of his tricks. Let him try to flip me out!"

"I don't think he will," said Pasc. "I don't think he has any idea of it."

"Well, if he has," I said, "let him. I'm nobody's fool. I can watch and keep my mouth shut, myself, if I have to. Watch his tricks, and get on to him. And on the other hand, if I do keep in with him, as you claim, I'll have the best schoolmaster in this money business in this part of the country."

"If you don't start fighting him," said Pasc, grinning.

"Don't you fret about me," said I. "I can stop fighting, when I have to. When I think there's something in it. And I think there will be this time.

"I'm going to sit around and watch his tricks," I said, making up my mind right there, "and learn

that game of his. Stay right with him everywhere — in this business, and outside — if I can work it. Watch Billings running that money machine of his. It'll come in handy to me, not only squeezing the most I can out of this thing of ours; but there ought to be something else, every now and then, on the side, if you only have sense enough to see it and pick it up, that would help fat up your bank account — if a man keeps his eyes open."

"You'll get to be a terribly tricky man, Bill, I don't doubt," said Pasc, looking at me with that faint old leathery smile he had sometimes, around his mouth.

"That's all right," I told him. "But I know, and you know there is just such a thing; that those fellows with the money, like Proctor Billings, have got a system for grabbing everything and turning it into money; a regular machine for turning money out — just as sure as we've got a machine shop here, you might say, for turning out speed. And they've got their methods, just like any other trade. And it won't do me any harm to sit down and watch them do it. See how a man like Proctor Billings manipulates it, to turn out a million or so every year or two — out of nothing!"

"You mean to say," said Pasc, thinking of something else all the time, "that he thought that share of mine in the business might be worth three hundred thousand dollars, when everything gets started, at seven per cent. interest?"

"I can't tell you what he thinks," said I. "But I do. I'm sure of it now. You'll be sure of that

much in a year or two — if he'll put himself and his money right behind it now."

" It don't seem true, exactly," said Pasc, looking off. " It don't seem possible. But I'll be glad for one thing, anyhow; it'll give Zetta a chance to amuse herself finally. It will pay her back a little for having a half invalid on her hands.

" Get her out of housework, and the movies, for amusements," he said, going on —" give her some money to spend dressing herself; and let her move around, and have some lively times, the way lively good-looking women of her age want to. And do, when they ain't hitched up to an old cripple like me, with a case of carburetor on the brain."

" Oh, shut up. Don't be a fool! " I told him.

CHAPTER XV

AN ANNIVERSARY

Well, I was president of that new corporation, the Hoodlum Motor Cycle Company, and Proctor Billings was treasurer, just as he planned it. I was protected in my rights by an agreement; but he was to have a kind of general veto control — as long as his money was financing it. But not a minute longer!

"There are two main things," he said to me after we had it fixed, "as I analyze it. The first is to speed everything up. Speed up and rush out the goods for the demand — while it's on. That's your end."

"You watch me jam it," I told him.

"And the second thing is to get the money to carry it, and to get that new factory up. And that's my province."

"It works out well, don't it," said I, "when you come to divide it up. We two ought to knock the tar out of that proposition."

"I hope so," he said

"I know so," I told him. I was feeling good, to see it going the way it was; and I was getting on a little better now, more friendly. I'd have been friendly with the devil himself, making so much money as we two were together.

"And so far as keeping down costs go, and all that detail work," said Billings, "I don't think we can do better than those two Scotchmen — those two McAdams — that is, if you have no objections."

"Objections, no!" I told him. "They don't trouble me any. Let them burrow. I don't believe you could beat them for that business."

I didn't care much about seeing them around — those two silent hangdog things, slipping to and fro about the place. But I knew enough to know they knew their business — under Proctor Billings' direction. Queer things — tougher than bull beef; work all day and all night, and keep their mouth shut — like Indians on a long run. They liked the game for the game's sake, I could see, watching them — besides the money. They worked together — one holding down a cent, while the other one skinned it.

So we started out on that new arrangement — Pasc out of the management practically, except for a consultation now and then, and what improvements he worked out; keeping his own hours, dropping in when he felt like it, and the doctor said he might. And Billings and I went out after the business — I after the trade, and he after the finances.

He knew his line, I had to hand it to him — jollying him, when I got to know him better, at the twists and turns he took in the money end of the thing as we got along.

"You're a past master at it," I told him. "I can see that. Your old man put you onto the ropes be-

fore you were out of skirts. You were wise on this money business long before he put you into this banking machine of his."

I used to get right after him after a while.

"Oh I'm on to you," I used to say. "Your old man turned out the money here in this bank in a regular machine — just the same as we turn out motor cycles or old Allen turns out bicycle spokes. And handed over his trade to you. But I serve you notice right now," I told him. "I'm watching you all the time to learn your tricks — to see what your plant is and how you run it — just the same as you watched us. I'm going to learn before I get through, how one of these money machines is put together and operated. How you smooth-handed boys go to work to get the dollars, without ever having to soil your fingers."

It made him squirm some — I could see that, when I got after him that way. But what did I care? I was just as good as he was. And I knew, anyhow, he'd take most anything from a man who he was making so much money with as we were together.

I don't know as there's much to say about that next year, except that everything went our way, and we doubled up the business again. I don't know as I could remember anything particular, if it had happened. We were too busy to remember anything but that one main idea — the business always jumping up faster and faster; and we people in the plant rushing around like crazy men, getting up at six o'clock and getting to bed at midnight, tearing

the days and nights to pieces, trying to keep up with our new business.

"You'll kill yourself," said Polly. She was all the time kicking about it.

"Kill myself, nothing!" I said. "The more work like this they feed me, the better I like it. I can tear it up, and ask for more. All I wish is that the day was one hundred and twenty-four hours long instead of what it is."

"All right," said Polly. "Have it your own way. Maybe you won't say that some day — if you keep going all night and all day, too. You're human, like the rest of us, if you don't think so. Your digestion's all out of kilter now, and you know it.

"Wh-why wouldn't it be," she'd say, getting excited and stammering; "sit-sitting around the restaurants with those men in all that tobacco smoke, eating all that heavy greasy food."

"Oh, go hire a hall, Pol," I told her. "I know what I'm about. Go to sleep. You're getting so you croak like a tree toad in a summer dry spell — all night long."

But I was showing considerable speed, at that. A man less tough than I was wouldn't have stood it — rushing around keeping the plant keyed up to the last notch; getting that new factory started, and the extra stuff bought for it. And when I wasn't there, going jamming around the country, getting new agencies established, sleeping on Pullmans and eating most anything, most any time, taking out the trade, getting them satisfied and friendly.

"It's lucky God gave me two men's appetite — in this business!" I used to tell them. "Half my value to the company's my eating ability with its customers."

"How about a drink, Bill — now and then?" said this fellow I was talking to.

"You never saw me yet," I said, heating up, "when I turned a hair."

"No, Bill, you're a wonder!" said he.

I guess that was right. I guess if I hadn't been extra husky I never could have stood it. Nor if that thing hadn't been going our way so strong. You can always manage to get out of bed in the morning and go at it again, if you know you're making money enough. And we were making enough in that company now to make a dead man get up and hustle. By the end of that year there was no question about it — we were going to be rich out of it.

Pasc Thomas didn't seem to be improved so very much after he got out of the management. There was nothing new; just his nerves, just his sleeplessness — his mind still out of his control, chasing around after carburetors and valves or some other hundred per cent. improvements on the motor. He wasn't any better that summer, and Zetta finally came to me with an idea about it. She'd got so she talked pretty free to me — about everything.

"I kind of believe I'd like to take him out to the West," she said. "Go to Yellowstone Park and the Rocky Mountains; and then go down, maybe, and spend the fall and winter in Los Angeles — if you can fix it! Give him a change of air, and a

change of mind; give him a chance to see the country, and turn his ideas in a new direction.

"And I'm speaking once for him and twice for myself, I guess," said Zetta —"saying it. I wouldn't mind getting out and seeing the country a little myself. I certainly am sick of this town. It's full of dead ones. From all I can see, all the women around where we live want to do is to read the family history, and turn up their noses at anybody that's shown any signs of life since 1642."

Her face got kind of red and flushed, talking about it.

"So I believe I'd like to do it," she said, "both for his sake and mine, if you can fix it for us to let Pasc get away from the factory entirely."

"I can do better than that, I believe, now," I told her. And I took it up with Billings.

"Yes," he said, thinking and looking down. "I think we're in a position to do it, now. I think there is no reason why we shouldn't cut off his salary now, and start paying him his dividends on that preferred stock."

"It's making it twice over."

"Yes," he said. "Five times."

And so we started in on the preferred dividends.

"You've got to score that up to Billings' credit, anyhow," said Zetta, tickled to death with the thought of getting loose, traveling.

"Yes," I said. But I could see, too, that there was something back of it; that Billings figured it was good policy to have the preferred paying dividends.

I remember that night before Pasc and his wife started off for the West, and the dinner party Polly and I gave them up at our house — the four of us together, in our new house. We'd moved then, just lately, into our house on Bellevue Terrace. We made it a kind of anniversary of that other time — that first time they came to our other house on Collins Street, just before that Labor Day race that started us going.

"It seems good, don't it," said Pasc —"just us four together again?"

"It certainly does," said Polly.

"It don't seem possible," said Zetta, looking at me with that kind of fixed stare she'd got in her eyes, since Pasc's poor health. "All that's happened!

"But it is," she said, breaking off her stare, and talking louder. "That's the main thing." (And she laughed that loud, nervous laugh of hers.) "That's the main thing — we've got it now! We've got the wherewithal — and we can live! Eh, Pasc?"

She looked handsomer than ever that night. She was dressed up to kill — in one of those flame-colored dresses she used to wear, after that, evenings.

"Eh, Pasc?" she said, calling across the table to him.

He opened up that quick smile of his — and shut it up again without talking.

"You old crank! You poor old rooster, you!" she said to him. "You never could learn to en-

joy yourself, if you lived to be a thousand years old! Could you?" she said, and threw a kiss at him.

"You know what he's doing now?" she asked me. "He's gone back, and started working on that darned carburetor again. Started up again, just as we began packing up to go away."

"I just had this idea," said Pasc, looking sheepish, "I thought I'd get down before it slipped me."

"Out comes the old envelope and stub, eh?" I said to Zetta.

"Yep," she told me. "It's something a hundred per cent. better this time!"

"You bet," said I. "Always!"

"But he's going to cut it out on this trip," she said, her face coming down sober, "or I'll know the reason why. I'm going to get it off his mind, for once — and my own!" she said. Her voice was getting kind of sharp and jangly. "For one while! That's what we agreed before we started. And I'll see he keeps his agreement."

"Good for you, Zet," I told her. "I bet on you!"

"You better," she said. "Now let's talk about something that's agreeable. Let's talk about the money you're going to make."

"That sounds good to me," I said, laughing.

"How much is it going to be this year, Bill?" she asked me, looking at me with those devil-may-care black eyes of hers. "Your share? A hundred thousand dollars?"

"Not this year," I came back at her. "Next. You got that one little detail wrong, that's all."

"Otherwise I'm all right?" she said.

"You're all right, all the time — to me!" I told her.

"You remember that time," she said, "that other time we're celebrating now — when we all sat together in the old house on Collins Street — trying to figure out how we could possibly pull it out, and get the old Hoodlum started!"

"And your ring!" Polly struck in.

"You bet I do," said I. "And that reminds me," I said, looking over at Polly; and I reached in and dug that diamond ring I had for her out of my vest pocket — the biggest stone I could find in town. "That reminds me — of something that's got to be done right now."

And I got up from the table, and got a chair, and dragged it up back of her.

"Just to show you my memory's good," I said, "Shut your eyes now!"

And I reached over, while she shut them, and pushed it on her finger.

"There," said I, putting it on. "Don't say I never gave you anything!"

"Bill," said Polly, laughing. "That — that isn't the right finger. You've got it on the engagement finger."

"That's all right," I told her. "Any old finger goes with us, don't it, Zet?"

"You bet it does, with you, Bill," she said.

"And if Pasc says anything, I'll go to the mat with him," I told her —"right now!"

And Pasc grinned.

SHE KISSED ME — SOMEWHERE ON THE NORTHEAST CORNER OF MY EAR. *Page* 185.

"Take your hand away, anyway," said Polly, "so she can see it."

She sat there for a minute, when I did; that fine dark red color of hers mounting up to her cheeks.

"You've knocked me speechless, Bill," she said, finally, turning it around to look at it.

"It's the biggest I could find here in town, Zet," I told her. "It's a quarter of a carat more than my ring is."

"It's a wonder — that's what it is," she said, still staring at it. "Bill, you're a peach to me. You always were," she said, flushing up some more.

"S-sh," I said. "It's all right, but don't let my wife know about it."

And the rest of us all laughed and got red.

"She'll never know from me," said Zet, turning and pretending to sit up close to me, where our chairs were together — and then looked down at the stone some more.

"But it was great of you, Bill — and her, too," she said, and smiled at Polly. "But you most, of course, Bill," turning back to me.

"Of course," said I.

"I certainly love 'em," she said. "I never could get enough of them, especially like that! Why, I'd kiss a man for less than that, Bill!" she said, looking up at me, all at once.

"Go as far as you like," said I. And she did, she kissed me — somewhere on the northeast corner of my ear.

"Here. That'll do!" said Pasc, grinning.

"That's for remembering," she said to me.

"Oh, I don't forget things like that very often," I said. "Not if I know myself."

"I know you don't," said Zetta. "But here! I'm forgetting something myself," she said; and went over and got it from Pasc. "You can't guess what I've got for you, Bill," she told me.

"Is it anything like that arrangement you got Polly," I asked her, "with the lace all over it?"

"No," she said, and pulled out this watch charm — a Hoodlum, all made up and cast in gold.

"Pasc had it made for me, exactly right," she said. "And see — that diamond is the headlight!"

"It's a beaut," said I. "It's a dandy." And I sat looking at it.

"Do you like it — really?" she said, looking over at my chain. "Do you think it's as good as your Elk's emblem?"

"He'd be silly if he didn't," said Polly. "Those old Elks!"

"I would, that's right," I said. "I don't know when I've had anything that struck my fancy so."

I didn't either; it was certainly all right.

"For all kinds of things," I said. "For a keepsake, for one thing; or for just the way it's made up; it's a model, ain't it — a real model? It's a Hoodlum, just to the T. That's what it is. It's a regular razulah," I said —"and don't you forget it!"

"I'm glad you think so," said Zet.

"To say nothing of the girl that gave it to me," I told her.

"Well, we'll have to be going before long, won't we, Zet," said Pasc, finally, "if we're going to get everything ready for starting in the morning."

And then we drank a toast or two to them — when they said they'd got to go.

"Here's to us," said I. "Here's hoping. All we want — and a little more of it! A long life," I said —

"And an amusing one," said Zetta, taking it away from me. "Plenty of amusement," she said, and got up on my chair.

"Here's one," she said, "for all of us! Here's to the old Hoodlum — long may she pop!" And waved with her handkerchief.

And after that they went along home.

"Take care of yourself good," I heard Polly telling Pasc. "Come back here all rested. Don't let that giddy girl drag you around too much and keep you from your rest."

"No danger. Don't worry," said Zet, laughing and flashing her teeth. "It's carburetor that ails him. That's what's breaking up our home."

"Isn't she the wild one, when she once gets started," I said to Polly, talking them over with her, the way you do with your wife, getting ready for bed.

"Absolutely lawless," said Polly.

"But just as good-hearted as she can stick."

"Yes, she is," said Polly. "But what she wants most is excitement. Crazy all the time for something to do!"

"It's funny, too," I said, "with Pasc just the

other way so — especially now he ain't well. I don't know as they ought ever to have married. And yet," I said, thinking, "they seem to think the world of each other, too."

"They do," said Polly. "That's the worst of it."

"But if he gets tired of her," I said, "there's plenty that'll have her. She's certainly one good looker. She can come and sit on my knee any time she wants to."

"Can she?" said Polly. "We-well, she wouldn't if she had to live with you, and knew how cross and ugly you were to live with these days. I'm not worrying about any woman running off with you especially! All I'm afraid of now is, when you get up so ugly as you do when you don't sleep right lately, you'll go out some morning and b-bite some poor child in the street, and have to pay damages for it."

"Is that so?" said I, pinching her.

"Y-yes. And now let's go to sleep, if you intend to get any — or let me — before you've got to get up and start in on that new factory tomorrow morning. If you don't want to kill yourself, you'll have to get some sleep sometime, especially now!"

We were just getting the new factory finished that time when Pasc and Zet were starting for the Coast, and getting into it between times — trying to — without stopping filling our orders. And those were certainly some strenuous days. It was quite a place — this new one. Proctor Billings had built it and leased it to us on a piece of land he

owned along the railroad; on Thomas Avenue, a new street he opened up and named after Pasc.

I was there all that next day, working my head off, getting things started; and late again at night, going home for supper. And, going out through the shop to my auto, I ran into old Tom Powers, coming in on his job for the night. It seemed kind of funny to see him there — after being in the old place so long — and I stopped and talked with him a minute about the new plant.

"How do you like it, Tom," said I. "As far as it's got?"

"It's a grand place," he said. "You ought to be well satisfied with it."

"I am," I told him. "It's some different, eh, from the old days when we were starting up in that one floor on Elm Street?"

"Yes," said Tom. "There's some changes."

"But it was a good old shack at that, Tom," I said. "You can try as you like, but you can't quite forget the place you started out in."

"You can't, that's right," he answered me.

And we stopped a second or two.

"I hear 'em saying," he went along, "Mr. Thomas is out now entirely."

"Well, no," I said. "He's got his stock here yet, Tom, but he won't be very active here again, probably."

"Well, he'll have money enough, that's one thing," said Tom. "Where is he now? What'll he be doing?"

"He's gone out West, for his health, to have a little rest."

"Ah-ha," said Tom, wagging his old skull. "But he won't rest just the same."

"Why not?"

"That kind never does," said the old man. "I know. I know myself, from experience. When your mind gets started on a thing."

"You do, Tom, that's right," said I, looking at him. "You do, don't you? How's your machine? How's the old Miracle coming these days — anyhow?"

"Oh, I can't complain," said Tom. "She's coming along; I think I can see now the way to get around that one hitch in her."

"Good," said I, patting him on the back. "Got her moved over into the new place?" I asked him.

"I have."

"Well, I guess you're right, Tom," I told him, smiling, and thinking about what Zet had said about Pasc and his carburetor. "You fellows are all about the same. You won't let up until they bury you."

"That's right, too," said Tom.

And I told him, in a word or two, what Pasc was trying to do with the carburetor, and the higher speed motor.

"That's what they're after," said Tom.

"They're going faster and faster," I told him, especially with those aeroplane motors. They heat up so, they can't do anything with them."

"You saw in the paper how the Wright boys had

sold their flying invention to those Frenchmen," said Tom.

"Yes," said I.

"You never thought it would amount to much," he said, reminding me.

"No," I answered him, "I didn't. Well," I said, "your time will be coming next, Tom — with the old Miracle!" And I slapped him on the back and walked along.

He stood there, looking down, with his hand by his side, leaner and older, and more like an old skeleton than ever.

I heard him clearing his throat, and then finally he called after me.

"Mr. Morgan," he said.

"Yep."

"Did you hear about my boy?"

"No."

"He just had a bad accident in one of them racing Bowls."

CHAPTER XVI

AN EARLY CREDITOR

"Yes, I did!" I said. "I lied. I did hear about that. Certainly I did!"

I had. But I'd been so busy that time that it had just passed out of my mind. I'd heard it a night or two before, stopping at the garage for gas — overhearing some of those bottle-shaped boys hanging around there, talking about it.

"How did it happen?" I asked one of them.

"That Shang Murphy," he told me, stopping chewing gum a minute. "He'd been laying for him for two years, you might say."

"I thought they were both riding on the same team — for the Rajah people."

"They were," he said. "But not lately. That Shang got a bad spill a while ago, and they never took him back on again, so lately he'd been riding independent, on the outside."

And stopped, the way they do,— not talking to you, till you make them go on.

"He was sore," he told me finally —"at Chuck, especially. He thought he got him off the team — and swiped his place as their principal rider. So he had it in for him. He always did have, at that, ever since that first race Chuck beat him, riding for you."

"So that's it, huh?" I said.

He would know, of course, that's all they talk

about, those wise boys in front of the garages — the women going by and how fast they can run a car or a motor cycle. And more so, naturally, in a town where the factory is.

"Is that so?" said I. "How bad was Powers hurt?"

"They say it's his right hand," he told me. "A wheel got it."

"I God," I said. "That's getting to be an awful game, those Bowls, with the speeds they're making now. They ought to do something to stop it."

It all came back to me, of course — what I'd heard about it — when old Tom spoke to me. I told him so.

"How's he coming out?" I asked him.

"Well, he won't race any more, probably," he told me. "Anyhow, that's what they said at the hospital."

"I understand it's his right hand," I said, "like yours."

"Not so bad," he said. "But smashed up quite a lot, too. I don't know just how much — but so he won't have the strength in it to race on one of those domned things again."

"How about working — at a trade, in a shop?"

"They tell me he can do it, after awhile."

"You ought to be glad, then," I said, "if it'll get him into something regular, out of that devilish racing."

"I am," said Old Tom. "But his mother is most!"

"What's he going to do?" I asked him.

"That's what I was going to ask you about," said Tom, standing over on his other foot. "His mother wanted me to ask you if he couldn't come around and see you after he gets out of the hospital."

"Sure," said I. "Send him around. If I've got anything I can give him, he'll get it. I got him into the thing; I ought to be willing to help to get him out.

"How's he turned out?" I asked the old man. "What kind of a boy's he been?"

"He'd been better off if he'd not seen this racing game," he told me. "It's not been extra good for him. He's seen too much of the high life. And got too much for doing nothing — the way I see it."

"Well, maybe he'll steady up now," said I. "And it might be just the thing to start him in the shop like the rest of us did. That mightn't be a bad idea, might it?"

"No, sir," said Tom. "I wish you'd get him to do it."

"Send him around, anyhow — when he's ready," said I. "I'm pretty busy myself, now, but the first minute I can, I'll see him."

I was still out to do what I could for him. And I felt that way when he got out of the hospital and came around to see me in my new office.

"They said you wanted to see me," he started out, coming in, dressed up very slick, and sitting down, looking at me.

I didn't take much of a fancy to him, or the way

he went at it. "Well, yes," I said, passing it over. "How are you?"

"Oh, I'm all right."

"Just where did you hurt yourself?"

"I got it where the old man did," he told me. "The right hand."

"How is it — good enough to go to work yet?"

"That depends," said he, looking up at me and down again. "What work?"

I didn't care for his cut much, any more. He was a good looking boy — on the surface — too much so. And dressed up, like a clothing ad. He looked too good to me. A good looking boy with a bad eye. One of those wise ones you see roosting around in front of the garages — dressed up, paring their nails, and goggling at the servant girls. Looking down when you go by, and looking up and staring at your back when you're gone. Hating everybody that's got a dollar, on general principles, and trying to figure out how they can get a few dollars of easy money themselves without getting their fingers dirty. I know the breed, better than they know themselves. Seeing other people with money close to, all the time, makes them all the time dissatisfied.

I didn't care much for the way he acted, but I told him what I could do for him in the shop. I was going to give him that — as I told his father. And then, if he made good, I would push him along.

But I could see right away it didn't suit him.

"You haven't got an agency, somewhere?" he asked me, looking up. He kept his eyes down mostly, but when he wanted to, he looked up and

looked at you with this hard expression, afraid of nothing on God's earth.

"No. Not this minute," I came back, getting a little sore at his nerve, asking it; but still holding on to myself. "But what's the matter with your starting here in the shop the way the rest of us had to? Would your hand prevent you?"

"I don't know whether it would or not. It might. How much is there in it?" he said, looking up again.

And I told him.

"Ah-hah," he said. "Well, I guess that ain't my line. I could make more than that as a chauffeur, if I had to." And he got up and brushed some imaginary dust off his tailormade clothes.

"You're pretty particular, ain't you?" said I, getting hot under the collar, finally.

"What I thought you were going to offer me," he said, not turning a hair, "was an agency. That's more my line."

I was, as a matter of fact, later, when I had one — if he worked out all right. But I wouldn't say so to him.

"If I wanted to," I said, still holding myself down all I was able, "I couldn't very well give you one till I had one vacant!"

"I can wait," he said, staring up again.

"Well, you'll wait a damned long time," I said, letting loose a little, "if you turn this job down now, before you'll get another job from us."

"There are other places on earth," he said, and started to move off —"at that."

"You got that right," said I. "There's no law to compel you to come here — or us to hire you either!"

"Let me ask *you* something," he said to me, turning back a minute —"for a change!"

"What is it?"

"Are you the man," he asked me then, staring with that damned insolent, ugly look in his eyes —"are you the man that always talked so loud about paying his debts — to his friends and his enemies?"

"I generally manage to," I said, still holding back all I could. "Why?"

"Oh, nothing," he said. "I just wanted to hear you say it again. That's all."

"I'll say it again, all right," I said to him, "as many times as you want. You may find it out yet too. I pay my debts to my friends *and* my enemies! But paying up my friends don't include handing over easy money to cheap young cigarette bearers and clothing advertisements to sun their shapes around on the corners, when they ought to be at work like the rest of the folks."

"Yeh," he said. "You're like all the rest of them. When they've got a couple of hundred thousand, they always get the idea they were the ones that taught God how to turn on the sun.

"Easy money," he said, looking at me, with a nasty smile on his face. "God! I suppose you think you got a patent on it."

"That'll do for you," said I. "For some time. If you hadn't been so cocky, I had it all fixed up for something good for you. But no, that wouldn't do

you. You couldn't soil your hands in a machine shop — not for a minute. You're the wise boy, out for easy money. You know the patent, that's a sure thing. You know just how it's done — like all the rest of your kind that breed around gasoline the last ten years, like mosquito wrigglers in old rain water. But that lets me out. You're all right; you know so much about easy money, you can get all you want yourself. You don't have to come around here again, asking me for any of it. All you have to do is to go out and pick it up for yourself."

"Don't worry," he said, throwing me another ugly look. And then he went along out.

I didn't think much about him again till Pasc and his wife came back in the spring from California. I used to see him sometimes, hanging around the garage, but we didn't look at each other. He was around there — looking and criticizing and keeping his mouth shut, and dressed up regardless; playing the hero to the rest of those bottle-shaped boys, and every fool cheap girl in town who had money enough to buy a pair of long white shoes.

I was out in Chicago in the spring, looking over the agency, when Pasc and Zetta were coming back, and got on to my sleeper in the Chicago station.

"Why, *hello,*" said somebody back of me. "Look who's here!" And there was Zetta — in a big yellow hat, and a kind of yellow and black gown — dressed up to kill, coming back from those southern California hotels.

"Hello, where did you come from?" said I; and grabbed both her hands, when she held them out to

me. And nearly shook Pasc's arm off when he came back in. And we three visited all the evening, until the porter wanted to make up the berths.

"Well, Pasc," I said, sitting down with them. "I believe you're looking better."

"He is," said Zetta. "I'm the one that's all done up. I'm coming home to see if I can get over this trip."

"You don't look tired — to me," I said. "You're looking slick."

"Tired, no! I'm coming home for some excitement."

"Excitement —" I said, watching her, "after traveling all over the world!"

"Excitement," she said. "Yep, and a divorce!"

"A divorce, eh?"

"Yep, Bill," she said. "I'm a wronged and deserted wife."

And Pasc grinned one of those still old grins again.

"Pasc," I said. "I wouldn't have thought it of you."

"Yes," said Zetta, rattling on. "I've got the co-respondent all picked out. You've heard about these stenographers," she said, "and these wicked business men. Well, I've got a new one. I'm going to name his carburetor.

"And I'll get my divorce, all right, too. Any judge will give it to me that hears my story once."

Pasc grinned again, when she was saying it, but a little sheepish; and her voice sounded just a little sharp and jangly. You could see there was some sore spot in back of that fooling.

" I'll tell it to you, Bill," she said, " so you can see it for yourself. For six months," she went along, " I've been in this humiliating thing — traveling along all over with him and his carburetor. It started in at Yellowstone Park.

" Honest," she said. " And I leave it to him to say I'm right. He stayed inside the hotel practically all the time we were there in the Park. He couldn't tell you now whether El Capitan was a name of a saloon or a hot spring."

" I just happened to have an idea come to me, as I got there," said Pasc to me, looking foolish again.

" What'd you do, in the meanwhile? " I asked his wife, laughing.

" Do! What could I do? I let him alone, finally, with his carburetor. And I found the best looking guide I could, and went out riding with him, all over. I had the finest horse! " she said, looking up. " That was the one thing for me, in the whole trip. I haven't had so much fun since I was a kid.

" But honest," she said, " you don't know what it is, Bill, traveling alone for months with a man — who can't see anything day and night, but a little brass carburetor — in back of his eyes somewhere."

" Didn't you get acquainted at the hotels? " I asked her.

" A lot of stall-fed women," she said, " sitting on the piazzas. And a bunch of old knee-sprung men, so worn out and feeble their legs knock together when they were dancing. No life left in them — or they wouldn't be there. Just like all these pleasure hotels — they're all alike as far as I can see —

a combination of old folks' home and nursery.

"But I did learn the new dances," she said. "That's one thing!"

"Did you teach them to Pasc?" I asked her, laughing.

"No," she said. "He only dances with his carburetor!" And laughed a kind of harsh, flat laugh again.

"And of course," she said, "nobody danced much with me either. Why would they? If a woman can't get her husband to pay her any attention, it's not much of an advertisement for her."

"You had enough attention, I should say, from different ones, to satisfy most any woman," said Pasc.

"There's one other thing," she said, "I did get out of my trip. I learned to drive a car. There was a young fellow at the hotel with a runabout that showed me how. And I'm going right home, and I'm going to buy the fastest one they make. There's nothing like it. You can take off your hat, and put down the wind shield — and go! There's nothing like it; you can forget everything else in the world — just *go!*"

I had to smile at her — and Pasc with me — watching her eyes flash all of a sudden.

"You'll have to look out for her, Pasc," I said; "she's got the speed bug!"

"She has. Bad," he told me.

And after that — speaking of driving — we got talking about that Chuck Powers. They'd heard about that accident of his when they were out in Los

Angeles. It was getting to be a center for motor cycle racing about that time.

"Wasn't it a shame," said Zetta. "An awful thing! Just think of it. They say he was the best motor cycle rider on the track — in this country, if not in the whole world. And that means he went the fastest — drove the fastest thing in the world, faster than anybody has ever gone, except maybe that Englishman! Think of the nerve it took, and courage! Think of the excitement of doing it! And now he's got to stop, entirely. Just that young fellow!"

"Well," I said, "it looks to me worse than that. It looks to me as if it had spoiled him entirely for doing anything else."

And I told them about my experience with them.

"But why didn't you do it?" Zetta said to me right away, when I told her how he'd held me up — and what he wanted. "Why didn't you give him an agency, if he wanted it?"

"How could I," I came back at her, "when there wasn't any vacancy?"

"Why didn't you make a vacancy, then?"

"And throw another man out?"

"Sure. I would," she said.

"You would, I believe," I told her. "There's a woman's idea of business," I said to Pasc, a little miffed.

"Sure I would. If I owed anybody what we owe to him," said Zetta.

"Well, if you want to know," I said, getting a little huffy, "I'd have had something better for him

before he got through, if he hadn't been quite so cocky about it.

"But since then," I said, defending myself, "I've been just as well pleased that I didn't do any different than I did. I had him looked up afterwards — and I don't want him. I wouldn't have him at any price, around handling agency funds."

"Why not?" Zetta wanted to know.

"Too much high life — that racing life was too much for him. I found that out later."

"But he couldn't drink," said Zetta, "a rider, at those speeds."

"No, that wasn't it."

"What was it then?" she came back.

"The women, if you want to know!" I told her.

"Well," she said, thinking, "he *was* a handsome boy."

"Too darned handsome," I said. "And too much of a regular devil."

"I don't believe it, anyhow!" she said to me all at once.

"Believe it or not; that's his reputation! And all the money he's got has gone somewhere, that's sure. He's standing around there now, in his nifty clothes, without a cent left — too swell-headed to take any ordinary job, and his old mother feeding him at home. Aw, they make me sick, this young crowd that's coming up around our business, looking for easy money."

And the porter came around about that time, and routed us out, and we dropped it. Zet went in to get ready for the night; and Pasc and I went out and sat

up till one o'clock in the smoking room and talked business.

"What is it you've been fussing over?" I asked him. "Is she right? Have you got some new wrinkle on the carburetor?"

"Not yet," he said. "I'm working over it. I've got a good idea, but it don't seem to work out yet."

"You'll get it," I told him. "I bet on you."

"I hope so," he said. "It's wearing me thin again, running me."

"Why don't you ever drop it, and go at it fresh sometime," I said to him —"after you've rested."

"I wish I could," he said. "But I ain't done so bad this time, all together!" And then asked me how Billings and I were getting on in the business.

"Oh, all right, I guess," I told him. "Yes — we're making a lot of money. But it ain't like the old days, Pasc, when you and I were there."

"I think he generally means to do the fair business thing, in his way," said Pasc.

"Well, maybe," I told him. "Maybe that's the way they have to be when they're trained the way he's been. But try my damndest, I can't like him. Down at the bottom of my heart, I don't ever trust him. I'm afraid of him. He's always sitting there cooking up something. Some new sleight of hand to pull your money out of his sleeve.

"It's different entirely," I told Pasc, "from the old days. We're only together — Billings and I — hunting dollars, that's all. It's dog eat dog. He knows it, and I know it. And that's all there is to it!"

And then I went on and told him about that rearrangement of the stock we were working out then — that I was worrying and puzzling over about that time.

CHAPTER XVII

A LITTLE SOMETHING ON THE SIDE

Proctor Billings had called me around to the bank about a month before that.

"I believe," he said, sitting there, "the time is about right for refinancing."

He had a new style now; he smoked all his cigarettes in a holder, sticking out about a foot from his face. He couldn't stand it to touch a bare cigarette with his lips any longer. And beside him on his desk always, he had the fresh flowers from his conservatory. All elegance and la-de-da and lovely cut flowers on the outside; and inside, about a half an inch, colder and harder than the ice that's been piling up at the North Pole for the last five million years. I had to smile to myself, watching him.

"I believe," he said, in that nice particular way he had when he was pleased with the way things were going, "I believe we could begin to start to move towards some more permanent basis of capitalization than we are on now. It would be better for both of us. I could get rid of the burden of the financing; and you," he said, with his carefully measured smile, "could get out finally from under this control of the company I've had while I'm furnishing the money."

"I could stand that — too," I told him.

"I imagined so," he said. "And I could stand

myself getting some of my money back, and getting my own credit straightened out. Money's pretty easy," said Billings, explaining. "And they've been putting out quite a variety of automobile stock with more or less success. A good many of them with not such good prospects, or earning so much as ours! There's something like a little boom in that line of stock; and for my part, I'm in favor of taking advantage of it to start in the direction of turning this thing of ours into a little money."

"Cash in, eh?" I told him. "Well, you've got me with you there. Go the limit. Go after it!"

"You mean that?" he said.

"You bet I do," I answered him.

And then he told me his idea.

"I believe," he said, "the only way to do with a thing like this is go straight to New York and do it right in the beginning, with the really big people.

"You can go up to Hartford, of course, or any smaller place. But their market for securities is only small and local; they'd have to go to New York themselves anyhow. And my idea has always been to go yourself to New York — right down to the big banks yourself. The only danger is," he said, "they're so big!"

"Ah-ha," I said, and shut up. I wasn't showing my hand much. That Wall Street game was something new and strange to me, but naturally I wasn't telling him so.

"They're big," he said, "and they're sharp. And a thing like this is only a mouthful for them. They might eat us right up, if you don't look out for

them. But on the other hand, they've got the machinery to take care of you simply and easily. And you've got to go to them anyhow, probably; if you don't the smaller people will, very likely. The best thing, I always thought, was to go right to them in the first place yourself. There's no more danger."

"Go ahead," I said; "if they don't scare you, they don't me."

I had been watching that banking business some myself — there in his bank. Billings had just made me a director there. He ought to; we were the second largest business in it. But while I was around the place, I kept my eyeballs busy watching him and those other fellows with capital he had with him operate it — poking around, grabbing off the cream of everything around town. I had a little thing myself by this time, that I had an idea I would have a try at along that line. I was working on it when Billings went down to see those New Yorkers. I didn't know how I was going to do it, but there is nothing like trying, to get your hand in.

"How'd you come out with him?" I asked Billings, when he came back from New York.

"I rather think they'll take it up," he told me, "on some sort of an issue of preferred stock."

"Good business," I said, thinking first of getting the company out once on its own feet, free of that control of his over it for furnishing the money. Tickled to death of being my own man finally, and getting the chance at the same time to cash in on my stock. I thought then, too, I might maybe get

this little thing I was thinking of into the new deal somehow, if I could work it. And cash in a little something on the side.

"Fine business," I said to Billings, feeling pretty pleased over what he was doing, but knowing I'd got to watch him, just the same. "That's the stuff," I said, slapping him on the back. "Go after it, boy."

He didn't know what to do with himself when I did anything like that. It made him jump all over. I did it half for deviltry. What did I care? I wasn't afraid of him now. I knew he'd have to put up with it, anyhow, as long as we were making good so.

So then I went to work on that little deal of mine, right away, seeing what I could do with it.

There was this little old shop that had made spokes for us — way back in the old bicycle business, and had kept right along with us, selling the stuff ever since. I'd been watching it for some time. I thought I could get a hold of it at first, and see if I couldn't make a dollar out of it myself. But now I thought: "Here's a chance to get it and work it into this new concern of ours, if it goes through — as a side issue in this new stock deal." So I tackled it between times — at luncheon mostly.

I used to see young Allen, who had the old place with his father, when he was in at Lembach's, where a good many of us used to go at noon on account of their cooking — that good old substantial German cooking there, and their beer. They had the best Wurtzburger in town. I met young Allen there, and at the Elks' rooms, when we both hap-

pened to be in there together. And I got him to talking now and then. I knew his old man, who really owned the place, was getting through pretty quick — kind of old and not very well. And I knew as well as I wanted to that Charley, the son, would just as soon get loose for once in his life, and get out of overalls, and drive an auto around, and see what the world looked like on the other side of those grimy old machine-shop windows, from seven A. M. to six P. M. So finally I worked an option out of them. Then I went to Billings.

When I told him about it, he was a lot easier than I thought he would be. I thought maybe he'd want to be let in on it himself. But there was nothing like that came out at all, when I brought it up. He let me go on and explain it all out.

"Can it be worked?" I said. "Do you suppose I can fix it to bring it in on that new deal. It would be a good thing, all right, for the company."

"I wouldn't be surprised at all," he said. "Especially," he went on, watching his cigarette, "as I shall have something of the same kind to offer."

"Which?" I said.

"Bringing in my factory some way into the thing."

"Giving up the lease, and buying it in for the company?"

"That's it," he said.

"Why not?" said I, thinking. "Certainly. One hand washes the other. We'll bring the both of them in — on this preferred stock thing. And both of us make a legitimate dollar on it. All

right," I said. "You go ahead, will you? See what you can do!"

I knew then, of course, I'd have to keep my eyes peeled with him, and this New York crowd too.

And so he went down and talked it over with these New Yorkers and come back and told me what he thought he could do. And we worked some more on it together.

They were going to put out seven hundred thousand dollars more preferred stock, besides what Pasc Thomas had, making a million in all. There was two hundred thousand dollars of the old preferred stock in the treasury; and they would issue five hundred thousand new. Of course, this wouldn't have any voting power in the corporation. It left that just where it was in the common stock. The main issue, of course, between Billings and me to settle was the price of our two new things in it.

We finally agreed that he would have one hundred and fifty thousand dollars of the seven hundred thousand dollars of new preferred for his factory; and I'd get a hundred and twenty-five thousand for my thing. That worked us out a good fair profit. Then the rest of the preferred — that didn't go as commission to the New Yorkers — would clear up our debts, give us money for our finances, and set us free finally out of Billings's control.

That's what made me stick up my head in the air and snort — the idea of being free again; more, a hundred times, of course, than the little twenty-five or thirty thousand dollars I was expecting to clear on that other thing. I was feeling pretty good about

that time — sitting watching that New York crowd shuffle the cards and put the deal through. Watching when I could that machine of theirs at work.

"We're all out after it," I was telling some of the boys in the train I had over to Lembach's at lunch. "They can tell you something else. But that's what we've all got on our minds nowadays. Easy money — quick! All of us, from your slick crooked chauffeur, lolling, waiting for the women shopping, at the edge of a sidewalk, to the head of a trust in his mahogany chair.

"But we're the dubs," I was saying to them. "You and I. These bankers are the boys! We get up before the dew stops falling, and hustle and sweat and get covered with oil and grease till the stars come out. And they drop down at ten A. M. in a limousine and sit there, and smoke their cigarettes and watch us; and figure how they're going to take away what we've got and turn it into money for themselves. Talk about your modern machinery," I said. "They've got the machine for you! A regular machine for manufacturing money. They don't have to make or sell anything to get it. They just make their money direct.

"I've been watching," I told them, "for the last year or two in this town. And I know something about them — about their machine, and how they work it. And it's a beaut! Take it from your Uncle Bill. They've got their eyes out everywhere in this town; nothing gets by them. They've got a regular system of watching, through the banks and each other; they know everything that comes up and

looks good in town. And when it gets ripe, they're there to pick it — on the dot. They step right up, some way, and declare themselves in."

"I guess there's something in that," said this fellow that was with me — old Piggy Briggs.

"You bet your life there is," I told him. "You know it as well as I do. I used to think it was something pretty soft — some pretty big money!"

"It might strike some of the rest of us that way, right now," said this other man — this other fellow that was with us.

"Pretty fair," I said, "at that, for ordinary folks. But I've got a look in, lately, on a new thing — something that makes these fellows here look like thirty cents in the Waldorf Astoria. I've got a squint on these million dollar boys from New York — these Wall Street bankers."

"Tell us about them, quick," said Briggsy.

"You know as much as I do, probably," I said to them —"up-to-date. We all know about the same. Only this —" I said. "I know this. I know they've got a machine stretching all over this country, that makes this thing here look like nothing.

"You know what you've got to run up against in business, getting money," I told them —"always. Well, I used to think at first it was just myself, not getting in right to get them to lend me money — just what you'd got to expect to run against naturally in any town, where they have a big strong bank. But, oh, no, it's nothing like that! I got a look into it lately, working up a little stock deal. This thing here in town is nothing but one little cog in a wheel.

They're all meshed in together, all over the country, in this big machine — this money machine these fellows are running for themselves down in New York. You talk about coining money! These fellows make a million dollars every time we pick up ten. You ought to watch them for a while. Oh, mama! Oh, what a graft! What a machine they have got! They've got the whole country watched that way, like Billings and his gang watch this town — through their banks and agents and one thing and another. They all have to come and bring their stuff to them sooner or later, from all over; to have it turned into dollars. These fellows own the only machine for it. All they have to do is watch, and hold us all up and collect their pay — three million dollars apiece every afternoon at three o'clock.

"Oh, I've watched them a little here locally, boys," I said. "I'm nobody's damn fool if I do look it. I've watched them in operation. And believe me, one of these days I'm going to get my hand in on that; I'm going to have some of that easy money myself."

"Easy money!" said somebody, laughing, "easy money! What do you know about that? Bill Morgan moaning about easy money? The only case on record in the United States of a man who sprained his back picking up money out of the road. It's in all the medical papers."

And they all began laughing

"Laugh, if you want to," said I. "You wouldn't laugh so much, if you had to get up in the morning, and follow me around doing my day's work. You'd

be wind-broken. Every one of you fat-handed, hotel-fed loafers. But after this — you hear me — I'm going to let up a little and make my money easier. I'm going to get in on this other game now and then. I've got a little deal on now," I told them, " just a little starter, that looks good for just a little bit of money."

" I'll bet it's a million dollars, or the old boy wouldn't stoop over to pick it up," said this man who was jollying me, and they all laughed again, down to old Hansie, the waiter.

" Laugh, if you want to," I told them. " Go on. I might have my million some day at that. But whether I do or not, I'm going to take a crack at this game these still-faced bank boys are doing. It's the biggest thing in the country, and I'm going to learn it and get in on it.

" I ain't afraid of them," I said, " nor to match myself against them. None of us at this table need to be, if we ever got anywhere near an even break with them. Did you ever see them? " I asked this man. " Did you ever know one of these still-faced fellows in that sort of thing, personally? "

" I don't know as I have," he told me —" very well."

" A queer breed of cats," I said, seeing Proctor Billings when I said it. " Still-faced dudes, la-de-da boys, all of them. They'd die, every one of them, on the spot, if they saw Charley Briggs here, that time he was stewed in Chicago, eating his pie with his knife."

" You lie,I never did! " said Charley.

"Not a regular man in the whole bunch of them," I went along, paying no attention to him. "Not a one of them that ever got out in a sand lot with the other boys and played a game of ball when they were kids. They catch them early," I said, "on account of their fine complexions; and long white fingers."

"Like professional gamblers!" said Charley.

"Sure," said I, "same thing! And then they put them inside these banks, and train them for years to keep their faces still — doing a murder! To put over some new deal, without turning an eyelash. Oh, you've got to watch them," I said, "every minute of the day, and have a night watchman on them nights."

And then I got up.

"I'm liable to have to see one this afternoon," I said. And they all laughed. They knew what I meant, of course. And I went out over and saw Billings at his bank.

I was feeling pretty strong naturally; right up in G — with things moving the way they were. I had been, ever since I'd seen I was going to get out from that old stock-voting control of Billings', especially; ever since I'd seen I was going to be my own man again, when this financing was done.

"He was just telephoning to you, I think, Mr. Morgan," said Billings' secretary, when I got there. He was extra polite even for him, it seemed to me.

And then I went on through that private reception room, with the polished woodwork and the little pictures of sheep on the wall. I had to smile when I remembered that other time I was sitting there and

waiting, shivering in my boots. And I went along into Billings' office and tapped once and walked in, smoking my cigar.

"Well," I said, sitting down, "how's she coming? What do you hear from our friends in New York?"

And he handed me out then their last plan, as they'd finished it. He didn't say anything. He sat still and let me read it.

"This is just the same, ain't it?" said I. "The preferred stock?"

"Exactly," he said.

"But what's this?" I said, turning the page. "Here, this is a new one!"

"That's their addition," said Proctor Billings. "That's a change they have insisted on."

"Insisted on," said I. "What is it?"

"At the last minute," he said, "they decided that to put it through, they would have to have that two hundred thousand dollars of common stock in the treasury, to give out as a bonus to their customers — two to every seven of preferred."

"They've got some nerve!" said I.

"Well, that's what they ask," said Billings, and closed up again.

"I don't like it, much — not much!" said I, studying. "If you ask me. And I'll —"

"I know," he said. "But, of course, you get your share of it with your preferred in this new deal."

"Yes," I said, studying some more. "And so do you. And look here," I said, for it struck me then, naturally, right in the eyes. "Look here," I

said. "What's this? You must think I'm a wise boy. Oh, no!" I said. "No. No! Nothing like this! You can't slip anything like that over on me!

"I God," I said, "that's certainly a raw one, even for a bank man. I suppose," I said, "you thought I wouldn't see the little joker in that."

"I had nothing to do with it whatever," he said, getting white and still, and extra polite. "It was all done in New York."

But I didn't pay any attention to him. I was crazy.

"Oh, no," I said. "Nothing like that. I'll bust it all up first — and wipe it out all together.

"I like this," I said, getting madder and madder. "Here I am, planning especially to get out from under your control of the company. We agree that I'm going to be my own man for once — just as much in the concern as you are. No more or no less. And now you spring this on me the last minute. When this goes through, according to the price you set on your building and what I get for mine on this other thing, you'll have more common stock than I will. You'll have control of the company forever!"

"I told you once," he said, getting whiter, and lowering his voice way down, "I had nothing to do with the arrangement of the thing."

"Ah-ha," I said. "I heard you. But it hands you the control just the same, don't it — whoever put it over. It does, don't it?" I said, facing him with it.

"No," he said, cooler than ever, getting whiter

and colder — as usual, when he got mad — and politer than polite.

"No!" he said. "And now, if you will kindly stop charging around like a wild animal, I shall be very glad to discuss it with you. If you act like an intelligent man."

"You tell me first," said I. "Don't this give you more preferred stock than I've got? Don't that give you absolute control?"

"Sit down," he said, those polished steel eyes on me. "That's what I'm trying to talk to you about — if you'll let me!"

CHAPTER XVIII

MUTUAL PROTECTION

"The first thing I'd like to ask you," he said, looking at me, "if you don't mind, is just what your attitude to this business is?"

"What do you mean by that," I came back at him.

"I mean what are you in it for, now, principally?"

"That's a weird question to ask a man," said I.

"I mean it," he said. "I would like to know."

"What am I in it for?" I said, staring at him. "What would I be in it for? What is any man in business for — his health? I'm in it for what anybody else is, I suppose; for the good old stuff — the spondulax — the iron man. I'm in it for just what you are — what you get out of it!"

"Then you'd sell, if you got your price?" he asked me, in that level voice, arranging a cigarette in his long holder.

"Certainly I would, if I got my price, wouldn't you?"

"Oh, yes," he said, lighting up his cigarette. "Oh, yes, that's what I'm in here for admittedly — to make money pure and simple. To get in, and get out, when I see a profit. But I always thought you might take a different view of it."

"Different," I said. "How?"

"I've always thought," he said, "you might have some sentiment about selling out."

"Me!" I said. "Sentiment! Well, that's a new one. That's the first time anybody ever called me sentimental yet."

And I stopped and laughed. I had to. "Well, I guess not; not if anybody came along once with my price," I said, "he'd get my share here, so quick it'd scare him."

"I'm glad to hear that — personally. That simplifies matters very much," said Billings.

"Why?" said I, stopping and looking at him, wondering what he was up to now. "What is this?" said I. "What's all this got to do with what we've been talking about — the control of this company."

I thought he was playing me off.

"Everything in the world," said Billings, "as I see it."

"How do you figure that out?"

"I can show you that, my friend," he said, talking now in that kind of precise measured way he talked sometimes, when he was getting over being mad —"in a very few words."

And I sat and watched him — close.

"You say I will have control here, with that new stock issue," he said. "If you think of it, you'll see I'll have nothing of the kind."

"You'll have more stock than I will," I said.

"But not a majority," he told me.

"What difference does that make, practically?" I said.

"A great deal. No, we will be both in exactly the same situation."

"I don't see it."

"The same situation," he repeated again, "and the same danger!"

"What's that?" I asked.

"Each one will be exposed to the other one's selling out any day to a third party — to somebody who has picked up enough more of that new stock to give him a clear majority."

"Or one of us might buy enough to control, himself," said I, "for that matter."

"Exactly," said Billings.

"Well, we could fix that by agreement," said I, "I should think."

"Yes," said Billings. "Yes. But the main danger from now on will be that at any time somebody might come in and offer a real temptation for one or the other of us to sell the other out."

"Come in," I said. "From where? Who'd want to buy it?"

"Our New York friends may, for one," he told me.

"The ones financing this?"

"Yes. They've been getting into motor stocks pretty deep lately. Personally, I think they're going deeper. I believe, sooner or later, they're going to make a great consolidation of motors," he told me, when I asked him what it was. "And if they do, I believe they could use our product to advantage. That's just a guess on my part, of course," he told me. "But it's a good fair guess. And whether it

is or not, whether we have an offer, either you or I, I don't care myself for the chance of it all the time. I don't know how you may feel about it," he went on, "but for my part I'm perfectly free to say to you, I don't care to be in a situation where you or any other man can sell me out any minute. It isn't good business. It's bad for the nerves."

"Amen," I said, "I'm with you."

"You are?" he came back. "Well, then, all there is to do is to devise some form of agreement to cover the point for both of us."

"Go ahead," I told him.

"While we are operating the company together," he said then, "it will be simple enough. We can vote our stock together, with certain rights agreed upon between us. We haven't had much friction so far!"

"No," I had to admit.

"The difficulty will come up when either of us begins to think of selling. That's the thing we will have to arrange between us — for our mutual protection.

"There are several ways of doing it, of course," he told me. "You could bind yourself not to sell out to a third party, without first giving the other party to the agreement the right to buy at the same figure."

"There's some objection to that, as I understand it, ain't there?" I said.

"There is, yes. It might be difficult for the other man to raise the money to buy, under certain conditions, for so large a sum at any reasonable notice."

"It might open a hole for funny business," I said, "on the price — by a fake offer from a third party, for instance."

"It might," he said. And we both stopped, thinking it over.

"You say," he asked me, after a minute, "that you would sell, if you got your price?"

"You bet," said I.

"Have you ever thought," he said, "what your price would be — the limit?"

"I don't know as I have. Have you?"

"I've rather set a mark," he answered, "of what I thought it might be possible to get out of it."

"What?"

"A million dollars!"

"For just your own stock," said I, sitting up.

"Yes."

"Two million for both of us!"

"I believe it might be possible."

"I don't believe you can do it — in a thousand years," I said. "I don't believe you can come within a mile of it."

"Would you be satisfied," he asked me, with those still eyes of his, up watching me again, "with that sum for your stock?"

"Would I be *satisfied,*" I came right back, "with a million! Two million for the two of us! We'd have a fat chance of getting it!"

"I'm not so sure."

"In cash, I mean, not just some new stock!"

"That's what I mean," he told me. "If I sold at all."

I just laughed at him. It struck me funny.

"Well," he said then. "What if we do this: We will pool the vote on our stock while we're here together."

"That's all right."

"And agree for the present that neither one will sell his share for less than a million."

"In other words," I broke in, "we'll stick together. We won't sell it at all."

"You seem to think so," he said. "I'm not so sure. But if we both wanted to sell at any time, of course, on any other basis, we could easily agree to do it," he went on. We were getting down to business now. He had cut out the frills — and his face was as still as the old man's in the oil painting over him. I was getting busy myself, following to see where his mind was going.

"That's right," I told him. I couldn't see any out in that.

"Of course," he went along, and smiled a small smile, "if we did sell for that two million, either one or the other of us would have to do the selling."

"It won't be me," I said. "That ain't my line just this minute."

"I do offer more chances along that line, I suppose," he said.

"I'm willing to admit that," I told him, "always. You'll handle it if anybody does in this combination. Go on," I said, laughing again. "Try it. I'd like to see you.

"But there's one thing more," I said, stopping short.

"What?"

"Whoever sells it — whether you do or I do, the other man's got to get exactly the same price for the stock as the seller does. That'll be understood."

"That's agreeable to me," said Billings.

"Directly, or indirectly — or any other way. There'll be no rake-off for the seller in this — absolutely. No bonuses or commissions or side deals. We each get just exactly what the other does on the basis of the stock we own."

"That's agreeable to me," said Billings again, not changing a muscle.

"All right."

"Then I'll tell you what we'll do," he said, sitting up at his desk, after a minute —"so it will be absolutely sure. We'll sign two agreements — I to you, and you to me. We'll both agree, for a period of three years, say, that if we hold the company, we'll vote our stock together — always."

"Yes."

"But if either one can sell the other's stock for a million dollars or more, he has the option to do so."

"Provided," I said, "he gets himself no more than the other does."

"Exactly. I understand," said Billings. "But if you can sell my stock, or I yours — for a million —"

"You sell it," I said. "Quick as God'll let you. Only remember," I said, "share and share alike, or the whole thing's off; the option is no good."

"Certainly," said Proctor Billings. "That will be part of the agreement. But under this arrange-

ment," he went along, "you're willing to let these people go on with their financing it now?"

"Well, yes," I said, thinking a minute. "This thing is a roast they're putting over now. It's a rotten roast and a hold-up to get that common stock out of the treasury that way. But I don't know what we can do better — do you?"

"No,— so long as we get a good share of it ourselves."

"Well, then, let them go ahead, as far as I'm concerned. I think it will be better business, everything taken into consideration. That's what you think, isn't it?"

"Yes, I think so," he said, sitting there with his still fit on, watching — his eyes clear as crystal, and his face as still as an old cat looking around the corner at a squirrel. "I think so on the whole."

So we went into it on that basis.

"And you want to get busy," I said, when I got up to go, "right away. I'll be looking for my million."

"All right," he said, smiling. "I will. I don't say I will get any such price, you understand," he said, "I merely thought it would do no harm to try."

"Oh, I understand," I said. "I was just kidding you."

"Well, I'm very glad," said Billings, getting up with his polite manners on full force, to let me out, "we arranged it so easily. My father used to say," he said, turning back to the picture again, "it was hard enough to divide losses, but it was the devil to split up profits between two men."

And he gave me a cold long hand again, and shook hands, and I went out.

I didn't believe what he said; I didn't believe for a minute that anybody was going to offer us a million dollars for that property. But, yet, at the same time, it didn't make me mad at all to hear him say it. And we certainly weren't getting bad money now, any way he put it. And all that afternoon, it kept coming back to my head — as if somebody was calling it to me: "A million dollars. A million. Bill Morgan, millionaire!"

I went over to Lembach's for a little drink after I left the bank; and then right over to the office.

"A little more speed, Bill," I said to myself. "You've been letting down a little, since this little deal of yours was on. Back to the factory for yours. A little more speed. You've got to gear up a little bit higher, brother, if you're going into the millionaire class!"

I sat there and jammed things around in the office; and kept the office force humming, and half of them and myself after hours. They certainly heard from me in the office that afternoon. With that, and that luncheon and the boys, and the excitement of talking with Proctor Billings over that stock thing, my stomach went bad again, and I went home again that night late and ugly — feeling rocky.

It was that night, at the house, I first heard about the Thomases and Chuck Powers.

"You know what Pasc and Zetta have done?" Polly asked me when I got into the house.

"No."

"They've got Tom's boy for chauffeur; Pasc told me today."

"The fools!" I said. "What's he thinking of. That speed maniac!" I said. "They must be crazy. He'll kill them all before he's through."

"I'd rather ride behind him," said Polly, "than with Zetta, when she's out in that big new runabout of hers."

"They're two of a kind," I said —"she and the boy."

"Maybe he'll be more careful," said Polly, "driving somebody else."

"He can't be," I told her. "It gets in the blood after awhile. That's all he is, anyhow — speed! Speed," I said, "and some cheap tailor's clothes, pressed up every morning."

"You're a little bit hard on him, I always thought," said Polly.

And that made me hot, I suppose.

"Yes?" I said. "Well, I happen to know him, that's all. That ain't the only thing either. From all I hear, I don't think he's a fit thing to be driving a decent woman around, anyhow."

"Oh, Bill," said Polly. "That kid! You men are disgusting."

"What do you know about it?" I said to her. "He's twenty-three, yes — and he's older than most of us at forty — if you want to know! If you want to get an idea about what's what, you want to stand for a minute, and listen to those kids, as you call them — those bottle-shaped loafers before the

garage, tell what they know about the women going by."

"I — I'd like to," said Polly, getting sarcastic. "It would be a nice thing for me to spend my time doing."

"Well, you'll see me in the morning, going over and telling Pasc what I think about it!" said I.

"I would," said Polly. "I — I'd make myself just as popular as I could, mixing into family affairs like that?"

"You trust *me!*" said I.

"Yes — like a bull in a china shop," said she.

"You go to the devil! I'll do what I want to," I told her; and turned over and tried to get to sleep. I was feeling rotten still. My stomach was all in. She was right — though I wouldn't say it to her, naturally. I was uglier than hell's kitchen, those last few months, but I couldn't stop it. I seemed to have no control over myself at all.

CHAPTER XIX

A DIFFERENCE OF OPINION

"Look here," I said to Pasc, a few days after that, when I was stopping at his house. "What are you trying to do — kill your wife?"

"What do you mean?" said Pasc.

"Is it true, what I hear, you've engaged that Chuck Powers for a chauffeur?"

"Yes," Pasc told me, acting a little bit awkward. "He's going to work for us, temporarily, till he gets something else."

"You ought to have more sense," said I. "Don't you know he's the most reckless damned driver in seven States. And here in town," I told him, "he's got to be worse — even. He's got to be the town devil to hold up his reputation with those half-baked young speed experts around the garage."

"Well," said Pasc, acting as if he didn't want to talk about it, "it was Zetta's idea. And you know how she is about a car now!"

"Yes, I know. Fifty miles an hour is loafing through traffic! And that makes it all the worse."

"What is this?" said Zetta, coming in on us suddenly from the back room. "What are you saying about me?"

"I was saying to him," I said, making the best of it, "he ought to have more sense than to get that wild Chuck Powers to drive you around."

"Look here," she said, coming right at me, the way I knew she would, "what's that to you? Wasn't it enough," she said, snapping those black eyes of hers, "for you not to give him a job, when you owed it to him, without going around and trying to push him out of one, when he gets it."

"I offered him a job. A darned good job," I told her. "He'd have had it now, if he hadn't got such a swelled head."

"He couldn't take it, if he wanted to," she said. "His right hand is too stiff. He couldn't stand it."

"His head's too stiff," I said, "from swelling up between his ears. His hands are too clean, that's all that ails them. He's got too much good looks. He wants to stand around with the rest of those cigarette holders, who lop around in front of the garage and take the servant girls out on joy rides in somebody's machine they couldn't pay for, if they took all the pay for honest work they were ever going to get in their lives!"

"The trouble with you, Bill, is," she said, looking me in the eye: "you've had it in for him ever since he wouldn't take that job you offered him. You're sore. I don't blame him a bit for not taking that job — even if he could do it. That ain't his kind of work, anyway."

"No, he's too good for it," said I. "He's got too good a shape."

"And besides," she went along, "if you want to know, we've only got him temporarily — till he gets something else to do. We owed him that much, anyhow!"

"Aiming at me, I suppose?" I said.

"If you want to take it!" she said. "You owe him as much as we do — and more."

"Well, I've done what I'm going to," I told her. "I certainly wouldn't do anything for him now — not after the way he's acted. But if you want to," I said, "and want to get hung up on a telegraph pole — all right. Go ahead. I suppose you won't be satisfied, anyhow, unless you're going five hundred miles an hour in that runabout of yours. But that's your lookout.

"That's your lookout," I said, getting hotter as I went on. "But I wouldn't have him around on general principles. He's a bad egg all the way through. I wouldn't board him in my dog house," I said. "And I know what I'm talking about."

"So do I," said Zetta. "Let's talk about something else."

I was right, just the same, and I knew I was, though, naturally, I shut my mouth up then. That boy had gone bad since he'd been in that riding game, traveling around in the country, learning all the worst of the nasty underground things that a bunch of fresh young kids poking around from one city to another get taught to them. He was a handsome looking devil now. And he'd come back, like one of those kings of the dare-devils in the movies, a real hero, standing around with that bunch in front of the

garage, making comments on mankind in general, with just two ideas in their noodles — women and speed; how they're going to sneak off with somebody's machine, and take some cheap girl carousing around the country at sixty miles an hour, with a ten-dollar bill they've managed to knock down on the garage charges of their employers. I know that bunch; don't fret. I've watched them; and he was the wisest of the lot, the wisest, hardest boy there — under contract to be, you might say.

But I didn't say anything more about it then. I had my own business to attend to. I never spoke of it again, till that talk began to go around.

"Do you know what I heard to-day?" Polly asked me, one night, after we went to bed.

"No."

"A woman told me — you know who — that it was all around that Zetta is over in Watertown at that swell roadhouse there, dancing with that Tom's boy. People who've been over there have seen her several times — dancing with him."

"I don't believe it," I said. "I know who it was told you — and I don't believe it."

"It might be, at that," said Polly, "over there thirty-five miles away, where she'd think nobody from here would come."

"You've got that wrong," I said. "She's got more sense. She wouldn't do it."

"I don't know," said Polly. "She might. The girl's half crazy. She don't know what to do with herself — since they got their money, especially. She can't be attending Pasc all the time, and she's

never found anybody here that she liked. And nobody's taken her up anywhere."

"Ah-ha, maybe," I said. "But you're wrong about this other thing."

She wasn't though. I heard it several places after that. If the devilish boy hadn't had such a reputation everywhere — as a general all-around, still-mouthed devil, it would have been different. If he had been an ordinary chauffeur even, but he was something else. He was better than just a chauffeur, in a way. He was a kind of a town character — a celebrity. Everybody knew about the thing. And by and by it got too strong for me to stomach.

"Now here, Pasc," I said, going to him finally. "I'm going to talk to you like a Dutch uncle."

"What about?" said Pasc, staring at me.

He was looking awful thin and old lately. Those pale eyes, looking at you, from way down in their sockets — deeper and deeper.

"When are you going to let that young fool that's driving Zetta around for you go?" I asked him.

"Why?" Pasc asked, looking up quickly. "What do you mean? Have they had any more accidents I haven't heard about?"

"They've had enough, I guess," I said. "I've known of three. He'll get her some day. Or she'll get herself, driving along those country roads at such a clip."

"I know it," said Pasc. "But what can I do? That's what she wants. That's exactly what she's after now — tearing around in that car, and I can't stop it."

"Yes, you can stop it, too," I said, getting mad at that soft easy-going way he always had toward her. "You've got to. If you don't want to get her killed!"

"He's a wonderful driver," said Pasc. "You've got to say that for him!"

"That's the kind that always get theirs," said I, "sooner or later. And besides that, he ain't driving all the time. She's doing some of it. And there ain't any woman alive that's fit to drive at those high speeds — not if she once gets in a pinch!"

"Zetta's got a pretty good head on her," said Pasc, arguing with me.

"Maybe she has," I said, getting excited, I suppose, arguing. "You can take a chance with her, if you want to. But that ain't the only thing either. He's not a fit man to be driving around your wife — or anybody's wife."

"Who says so!" he said, starting up.

"I say so," I came back. "You know his reputation, as well as I do. If you don't you ought to, dragging these fool girls around nights, in your car, when you ain't home. I don't suppose, maybe, you know all that," I said, thinking —"with your eyes turned inside out all the time you're awake, looking at some new carburetor. But you ought to. If you don't, it's time you did.

"Now, look here," I said — kind of sorry for him, the way I always was, when I saw him handling practical things; "while I'm at it, I'm going through with what I've got to say. You and Zetta

are my friends. I haven't got any better that I know of!"

"I don't think you have," said Pasc, getting embarrassed.

"And I know what I say to you is right. And you'll take it the way I mean it. It ain't the right thing to have that boy driving Zetta around all times of the day and night, stopping at hotels and tea houses for refreshments. You and I know it's all right," I hurried up to say. "But it don't help her any. It can't help but make people talk."

"I'd like to hear 'em," said Pasc, his old leather face set.

"Well, they're doing it all right," I said. "You might just as well face the thing as it is."

He put his head down for quite a while after that — I waiting for him.

"I'm sorry for that," he said. "I'm sorry that's come —" and stopped.

"But it's my fault — if it has," he went on then, when I'd waited. "I take all the blame for it myself."

"Oh, rats," I told him. "Blame nothing!"

"I do," he said. "I'm a fit person for anybody to live with, let alone a quick, lively, full-blooded young woman like Zetta to be tied to! I'm nothing but a sick brain sitting in a chair, turning itself inside out, hunting a new idea for a carburetor; keeping on and on because it has to. With no more control over its motions than a clock has."

"I do think you could let up some," I told him, "for your own sake as well as hers. But that ain't

what I'm talking about now. What you want to do now — is to fire that boy."

"How can I?"

"Why can't you?"

"Zetta won't listen to it," he said. "Not till he gets another job. She says we owe it to him — and a lot more than we'll ever pay."

"The hell we do," I said, getting hot again.

"That's what she says, and what she'll stick to — you know that. Especially when he's down and out — kind of — this way."

I could see that, of course.

"Well, I'll tell you what I'll do," I said, thinking it over. "I'll do what I said I'd never do. But I'll do it for you! I'll get a place for him — an agency. I'll make it for him!"

"Much obliged to you, Bill; that's almighty nice of you," said Pasc. "Not that I think a whole lot about what you've just been saying about this other thing. Though I've taken it as you meant it! It's all right — from you!" he went on. "But I'll say this. I am worried half crazy sometimes — thinking about her tearing around any old road, all kinds of hours and weather, with that reckless boy driving her, or she driving him, which is even worse."

"But there's one thing," I said, waiting for him to get through, "I won't do! I won't go to him, and offer a job to him myself again. I won't do that — under any circumstances."

"I tell you what I wish you would do," said Pasc, "I wish you'd go to Zetta and get her to take it up

with him. I think there'd be more of a chance of him taking it."

"Taking it!" I said. "Taking it!"

"From you," said Pasc. "You've got to remember he's terrible sore at you. I don't really believe anybody but Zetta could get him to take it."

"You make me laugh," said I. "But I'll go. I'll see her. But I won't see him!"

So I went to her, and told her what I'd do.

"I'll see," said Zetta. "But I tell you now, I don't believe he'll do it."

"You ask him," I told her. "And then you'll know better. What he wants is a piece of easy money."

"It isn't so," said Zetta.

"Well, there it is," I said. "That's what he asked for. Now he's got it."

"All right. I'll take it up with him," she said.

But a day or two afterwards, when I went in to see about it, she said: "It's just as I thought; he wouldn't take it. He said he wouldn't take a job from you if it was his last meal on earth."

"He won't, eh?" I said, getting mad, and a little surprised, at that. "Well, he don't have to. But that shows you just what he is. He don't want to work. He's got a snap, and he knows it. He's bad clear through; that's what's the matter with him."

"I don't think so," said Zetta, her mouth setting. "I don't think that's the way he is at all."

"Now, look," I said. "I want to ask you something."

"Go ahead," she said.

"Are you still going to keep him?"

"Why not?"

"Well, I'll tell you why not, if you want to know," I said. "In the first place, you've got Pasc scared to death — jumping four ways for Sunday, for fear you'll get killed — smashed up with that reckless fool."

"There's nothing to it," she said. "He's one of the best drivers in the country."

"Well, you ought to think of Pasc, anyway," said I. "How he feels!"

"How often does he think of me?" she said, her eyes getting sharp and shiny. "Or anything besides that fool carburetor! No. *I* can take care of myself!"

"That's a nice thing to say," I said.

"Isn't it!" she said after me, her eyes getting hard.

"Yes," I came back at her. "It is. And there's something else, too, as long as we're on the subject. There's a second thing."

"What is it?" she asked, in a kind of a sharp suspicious voice.

"He's not a fit man to be driving you, or any other woman around.

"You must know that," I said, when she didn't answer. "If you don't, you ought to."

"Go ahead now you've started," she said, her eyes getting a still, dangerous light in them. "What else?"

"Nothing else," I said. "Except that you can't

do it — or any other woman can't — without getting talked about."

"Do what?" she said.

"Go around — driving up and down the country — stopping at tearooms and restaurants — dancing —" I said. I looked away from her — and said it. I thought I would get it out once and for all.

"What is this you're giving me," she said, very low and quiet. "An insult?"

"You know it ain't," I said.

And she stopped a minute, her mouth shut down tight.

"If anybody else said that to me, I'd kill them," she said then — and stopped, getting hold of herself again.

"I'll tell you this," she said finally, "so you'll know. Pasc knows all about what I do — everything — and has from the first."

"I don't doubt that," I said.

"And it's nobody else's business," she went on, giving me a stare.

"Maybe it ain't," I said. "But that don't prevent their making it their business."

"It's nobody's business," she said, "if I want to go out, and amuse myself — and get a little excitement out of life. And not sit at home, and mope around with a monomaniac — a man with one idea in his head."

"Don't!" said I.

"No. I'll take that back," she said. "He's almost sick, I know that. But he don't treat me fair!"

"He wouldn't treat you bad for the world," I told her.

"No, he don't beat me up," she said, in a kind of bitter voice. "I wish to God he would sometimes, so I'd know he noticed me!"

And we both sat still a minute.

"I try to do what I can," she went on. "I did try to keep him interested — the best I could. But it wasn't any use. He won't even look up and look at me, the way a man looks at a woman he cares for. So I've cut it out.

"So I do what I can to keep him well," she said, in this bitter voice; "and when I can't do anything else, I get out. I've got a right to that much!

"Besides," she said, letting down a bit, "I'm doing nothing wrong or underhanded. I've told him what I did. He understands it perfectly well."

"Yes," I said. "So do I. But the rest of them don't."

"What do I care," she said, letting go of herself — her cheeks with deep red spots in them, "for the rest of them? What they say! I don't give that," she said, snapping her fingers. "Or for you either!" she said all at once to me — her breathing coming quicker.

"You come in here, and insult me! In my own home," she said. "What do you think I am? I won't stand it — you — you — get —"

"Hold on, Zet; wait — before you go that far!" said I. "I'm not doing this for my own amusement. I've got something else to occupy my mind but going around insulting women. I'm doing this

because you and Pasc are the two best friends I've got — or I think you are. And I'd be damned sorry if you'd ever go to smash, any way. That's what I'm here for now. And you know it just as well as I do."

And she looked down — and didn't say anything back to me.

"Don't you?" I asked her.

"Yes. I guess so!" she said finally.

"I don't go whispering, and goggling behind your back. I come to you man fashion and tell you what's going on, like a friend should — or I think he should, anyhow.

"I come to you," I said, "because I've got a license to if anybody has. I'm just telling you facts you ought to know. And you've got no business to get mad over it — not for a minute."

"I suppose you're right — maybe —" she said, after awhile, thinking.

And I sat still, waiting to see if she'd say anything more.

"I always said," she came out finally, "I wouldn't explain to anybody. It was nobody's business — but I will — to you," she said, "as long as it's come up this way."

And then she went along to tell me about herself.

"For the rest of them," she said —"all of them, except you and Polly, I don't give one little silver damn. And the women especially. Especially the women! I never liked one scarcely, in my life. Not scarcely one. They're mean-spirited, small-souled things — the whole of them. I always liked

the men better. They're kinder hearted, and more charitable at bottom. They'd do more for you in trouble."

And she told me again about how she was raised, and about her father — an old-fashioned, horsey kind of a man, who kept a livery stable in a small town; one of those old-time, free-and-easy horse men.

"He was as fine a man, if I do say so," she said, holding her head up,—"as anybody! We had more money, and spent more than almost anybody else in that narrow-minded, mean-spirited, little, psalm-singing country village. There wasn't a man there who didn't like him — and say he was a good fellow. But did any of those dowdy, beady-eyed, bony-souled New England women have anything to do with us? Not on your life.

"The more I see of women," she broke out again, "the more I despise them. They ain't half so kind minded as a weasel. Except now and then, a few of them —" she said again, and tears came into her eyes —"like my mother was. Except when they come like my mother and your wife — like old Polly. And then they're half angels — too —" she said and stopped.

"Little sandy-headed, spunky angels," said I, smiling at her, letting her get on her feet again. "Eh?"

"Yes," she said, nodding her head, going on finally. "Too good and kind to count in with the rest of us ordinary folks.

"I'm a fool!" she said, and took out her handkerchief.

"See here," I said, after awhile, "Zet. Ain't this thing half your fault? Don't you stand the women off, as much as they do you?"

"What chance did they ever give me — home, or here in this town either? Oh, I know," she said. "I dress too gay. I talk too loud for them! I'm looking for too much excitement.

"Oh, I know them, as if I'd made them," she said. "And worked out their poor little hand-embroidered souls for them!"

"I don't believe it," I said. "If you went out to play with them, they'd come in and play with you."

"Who wants to play with them — those frozen-faced frumps?" she said to me. "I can have some amusement of my own — if I have to."

"If you met them half-way — like Polly does," I said; "and showed them you liked them!"

"That's different," she said. "Polly's different."

"Nonsense," I said. "Different nothing. You'll be just the same yourself, when you get in your new home up on the hill with us."

That was just after we'd bought our new house on High Hill.

"You'll get in just as well as we did."

"No, I won't," said Zetta. "And I don't want to. And about this other thing," she said, "we were talking about; I shall go ahead, just as I always did — so long as Pasc knows about it. So long as he says nothing, it's nobody else's business, if I want to get a little excitement out of life. You've got

to remember, Bill, I'm not getting any younger."

"Yes, you're terribly old," I said.

"I'm thirty — pretty near," she said. "And if I'm going to get anything out of being young, I've got to get busy. And as far as I look at it, it don't seem to me wildly wicked for me to go out and see other people enjoy themselves, dancing around."

"And dance around yourself, occasionally."

"Mighty seldom," she came back quick. "Only once or twice, when I just had to. Of course they'd make it a hundred, if they saw it once! I had to, Bill, I was feeling so darned blue. I get that way, every now and then, Bill; you know it. I get desperate. I just get where it's anything for a little excitement.

"And so far as this boy goes," she said, "you're wrong about him. You don't do him justice in the first place. You can't — after that row with him. He's nothing but a boy — I'm a grown woman to him.

"But if he was all you said he was," she went on, when I didn't say anything, "do you think for a minute I'm not able to take care of myself? The first minute he got gay," she said, her eyes flashing, "what would happen? What do you think!" she asked me.

"I suppose you'd eat him — alive," I said. "But that ain't it."

"It is, too," she said, "so far as I'm concerned. What do I care what they say? You don't know how it is, Bill," she said. "Being cooped up. Being a woman — all the time on your good behavior!

You don't know what it is not to have something to do. Do you now?" she asked me. "Imagine yourself!"

"No, I suppose I don't," I told her.

"Except tend a sick man who doesn't want you around."

"That ain't so," I told her. "And you know it."

But she just shook her head. "I oughtn't to be a woman," she said. "I wish a thousand times I could have been a boy instead of a girl. But it ain't really anything we can help, is it?" she said and smiled at me again — a little crooked.

"No," I said. "But for God's sake, Zetta, do what I tell you. Cut this boy out."

"I can't do it, Bill," she said.

"Can't — why not?" said I.

"I can't," she said. "I won't throw him down — now. When he's fixed the way he is. I owe him something. And I like him — in a way."

"Why?"

"He's such a young untamed devil, I guess," she said. "He don't care what he does. I guess maybe that's one main thing. And he's in hard luck. You don't believe it, but he is! He's desperate.

"But you didn't ever *think?*" she said, all at once — her voice getting sharp and hard again.

"Think nothing, Zet! You know me better than that," I said to her. "I like you. I always did like you. And I'd trust you anywhere. There ain't a crooked hair in your head. Only I think you're a little damn fool about this thing — and you've got to stop it."

"That's my business," said Zet.

"Look," I said, when she shook her head at me. "You will do this much; you'll try again to get him to take that job of mine. Insist on it."

"Yes. I'll try," she said finally. "But it won't be any good — any more than it was before. I can tell you that in advance.

"You don't like him, Bill," she told me again. She'd let down a little and was talking less excited. "And when you come down to it, you didn't treat him right. I know just the way it happened. When he got fresh, or when you thought he did, you had to get up and snatch his ears off — the first time he disagreed with you. And you've never forgotten it. And you never will. Oh, I know *you,* Bill," she said, "down to the ground. And so does everybody else.

"And there's another thing, while we're at it, talking out this way, Bill," she said to me. "I've wanted to say it for some time."

"What?"

"That Proctor Billings is going to get you, before you get through — trim you bad," she said, looking through me with those smart black eyes of hers.

"Why? What makes you think so?"

"I know it."

"How?"

"I don't know how."

"I guess you don't."

"I don't know how," she said. "But I know he will. You're too slam bang downright; you can

jam a thing through, all right, Bill; but you can't sit in with Proctor Billings on that game he's playing — with those still-faced boys, as you call them. Sooner or later, they'll get you."

"Don't you worry," said I.

"And I ain't the only one who thinks so, either," she told me. "I've heard them."

"Don't fret — not too much," I told her.

"I've warned you, anyway," she said, "of what I think, and what they're saying."

I didn't ask her who; I didn't attach enough importance to it. And then I came away — good friends with her still. Thinking it all over, about her and how she was fixed with Pasc and his inventions; and that crazy, reckless, bad-eyed boy, racing, faster and faster every hour, downhill to the devil.

"How much is there in what she says?" I said to Polly, after we'd gone to bed that night. "Are they really trying to freeze her out — the women here?"

"They don't like her. They're not much struck on any of us I guess," she told me, "if the truth was known."

"Why not?"

"For one thing, we've made too much money, too quick," she said. "And then again, we aren't like them!"

"Why not?" said I. "We're decent people. Just as good stock as they are."

"We're not, that's all," she said. "We ain't like them. We haven't been raised the same. It'll

be different with the children. I can see that already."

"There's one thing," I said. "They won't be darned snobs — if they don't want their heads knocked off!"

We were up there by that time, in that High Hill neighborhood — that swellest part of town; near the Proctor Billings, and the Waterburys, and the Fenby Lesters. Billings had helped get us in there — in that old Banks' house that had been for sale so long. And I felt the neighborhood, I thought, myself, sometimes — kind of stiff in the back of my neck.

"She's entirely different from them, too," said Polly, thinking. "You can't get around it. She hasn't got along here in town, a bit."

"She lays it all to the women," said I.

"Well, she's right," said Polly. "They don't like her."

"Why? Just for what reason?"

"Her dresses," said Polly. "She dresses pretty gay, for one thing, for a town outside of New York. And she *is* pretty fond of color. She would be noticeable anywhere. Then there's her high voice. And they don't like her grammar, either."

"Nor her good looks, I guess," I said —"probably!"

"Probably not," said Polly. "But she is pretty reckless — pretty lawless, you'll have to admit."

"She seems to always have to have excitement," I answered.

"She lives on it," said Polly.

"But you agree with her," I said. "You think it's the women that have got it in for her?"

"Yes, I do."

"What little mean things they are," I said.

"Yes, in a way," said Polly. "I suppose so. I suppose they are. I suppose they've got to be. They're brought up that way. They live in a world of little things — terribly small. Their main pleasure, I think sometimes, is seeing differences — thinking they and their folks are better than somebody else. They are just the same, I always thought, till they die, as they were when they were children. They never grow up, that way. They're just the same exactly as those little snippy kids who used to go to public school when we did, and went off by themselves together, because they had kid shoes and handmade underwear when the rest of us couldn't afford it.

"No; you can't get around it, Bill," said Polly. "Women are that — awful little in such things. But it ain't all bad either," she said. "It's a good thing some ways, I think sometimes."

"Good. How?" said I. "I don't see it."

"It makes them want to keep themselves up, all the time, and their children. Make them look good, and act decent, and keep up appearances, and get in with better people, always — more educated. And that goes a long ways sometimes. Men don't mind. They're kind of careless about such things. And somebody's got to do it. Somebody's got to keep up. It does a lot of good, taken all together. And it's a woman's job."

"I don't see it," I said. "That's stretching it pretty far."

"It's right though," said Polly. "It's better a lot of times — it has more influence on other women, what the women say and think, than all the police force in the country, that's my opinion."

"What a queer old girl you are, Pol," I said, patting her.

"It's true, all the same," she told me. "And that's one main trouble now with Zetta. She won't pay any attention to them — what they say, or what they think. She goes right ahead and does what she pleases."

"No," said I. "She doesn't give a hoot for anybody; she never did."

"Perfectly lawless," said Polly. "You can't blame them. She's got started, and she won't stop; and the more they say, the more she'll defy them. But you can't blame them, either, their talking about her."

"I suppose not," I said. "She's changed a whole lot," I went along, after awhile, "in the last few months. The strain of it's telling on her."

"It is," said Polly.

"I don't think I ever saw anybody change so much in such a little time. She used to be such a big strapping good-humored thing. Now she acts as if the devil was eating her raw. I never knew anybody to change so," said I.

"I have," said Polly.

"Who?"

"You!"

"Don't start that again," I said. And then I rolled over and went to sleep. I had something else on my mind to think about but women and their troubles, and what they thought. I had something big coming on now.

CHAPTER XX

WORD FROM NEW YORK

Proctor Billings had called me over to the bank the first of that week; and the minute I went in, I knew there was something on. He was so terribly polite and polished. You could quite often tell that one way, that something was coming — good or bad. You very likely didn't know which. But that was the one way he had of warning you — of showing his feelings in any way. But when he was extra polite — look out for something!

He sat there a minute or two, putting another gold engraved cigarette in his holder. Then he showed me the cut flowers on his desk.

"Orchids," he said. "I'm trying them in my conservatory a little. Aren't they good?"

I guessed then it was something pleasant he had to tell me. And right after that it came out.

"You know what I think?" he asked me.

"No — what?" said I, waiting for him.

"I think I'm going to take up that option."

"What option?"

"That one on your stock."

"For that million dollars," I said, stiffening up.

"Yes," he said, very cool and calm. "I think now I can get us both our million dollars, for that stock."

"Go on!" I told him.

"Yes."

"Apiece?"

"Yes."

"How?" said I.

"That Universal Motors combination they're forming — just as I thought they would," he went on, explaining. "They'll take in one motor cycle company, if they have the chance."

"How do you know?"

"I have had it from headquarters," said he. "From New York. Our same people are running it — Magnus and Company, the ones who financed us. You know that, of course.

"And I believe," he said, "if you and I manipulate it as it should be done; if we stand out together, we can get our million apiece for our stock here.

"If we want it now!" he said.

"If we want it!" I said. "Oh, no, we don't want it! You don't, do you, Boy?" said I, slapping him on the shoulder.

He took it like a little man. He even smiled a little.

"Yes, I think I would take it," he said, taking his cigarette holder out of his mouth slowly.

"Oh, no. We don't want it," said I. "Cripes —if I saw a million dollars for that stuff of mine," I said, "I'd grab it and run down the road so fast you couldn't see me in a month for dust."

"And I think, in addition," Billings went on, making another smile again, "I could get you placed at a big salary in the motor cycle end of the

company. I'd drop out, of course, when they left town here."

"Where'd they go?" said I.

"To Detroit, I suppose. They'd want to fit it in with the rest of the plant. There's where the money would be for them — saving on the overhead costs, and the agencies."

"Look," said I, "wouldn't they want to pay it out to us in stock?"

"Not to me," said Billings. "Cash only."

"Same here," I said. "I don't know anything about that other thing. You wouldn't know what you got hold of any more than fishing at night."

"Shall I go ahead then?"

"You bet you shall," said I.

I was feeling my oats pretty well when I went out through that waiting room that morning — that old private cooler where Proctor Billings had them wait for him to see them. And the pictures of the sheep. I had to smile, thinking of everything going out.

But I struck a snag right away I'd never dreamed of — with Polly.

"What do you think of this, Pol?" I said. "Eh? A million dollars in cash — if we can get it! And we might, at that! What would we have thought five years ago? Great business, eh?"

"Great," she said, getting excited. "I — I'm awful glad you're going to get it, Bill. I — is it all to be in money?"

"It will be, if we take it."

"That — that's fine," said Polly, brightening up

a lot. "That'll mean you'll have a chance to get out and rest up for awhile."

"Not so you notice it," I said. "Not if what we want goes through. I stay with it — as manager."

"Oh," said Polly, pulling off. "Then I don't care about it. It don't interest me."

"Don't interest you!" said I.

"No," she said. "It don't mean anything to me — a million dollars — any more; only a lot of figures. We've got all the money we want — long ago, and more. What I'm interested in is you. What I thought was that you were going to stop for awhile."

"Well, I guess not," I said. "If I can help it. Why should I? I never felt better in my life. I'm as fresh as a daisy."

"Why — why should you?" said Polly, firing up again. "Well, if you lived with yourself, you wouldn't have to ask that question. You're all to pieces," she said, her voice getting sharp. "Your digestion's gone. Your nerves are jangling all the time. Why wouldn't they be? U-up all hours of the day and night, at the factory. O-out every day and half the night, eating heavy meals at that Lembach's and the Elks with those men. You can't stand it. Nobody can. You're different entirely. You're like a bear with a sore head. Nobody can look at you, but you get up and want to bite them."

"I must be a nice thing to live with, according to you," I said.

"You are," said Pol. "And it's a shame too," she said, after awhile, "when you're naturally so good tempered — when you aren't all to pieces! That's why I wanted to jump up and laugh out loud when I heard it. I thought you were going to sell out for good."

"You laugh too quick," I told her.

"Bill," she said, coming over and putting her arm around me. "You've been going too fast. You can't do it. You don't see it, but I do. You don't want to get laid out, like Pasc, do you — a chronic invalid?"

"I'm not Pasc," I said.

"No," she said. "But you're flesh and blood, just the same — if you don't think so. You can't stand this always. I know; I can see."

"I wish you'd stop giving out that moan about Pasc," said I, getting sore. "I'm sick and tired of hearing it. I'm not like Pasc in the slightest degree. And you know it. I'm no broken-down bag of bones."

"N-no," she said, hurrying it out. "You're big and fat and puffy. Just as bad the other way. Just as bad exactly."

"Oh, piffle," I said, shaking her arm off.

"There you go again!" she said.

"Well, this hasn't been done yet," said I. "Very likely it won't ever be. The probabilities are we'll stay right here and keep on going the way we are now."

"And, as for going to Detroit," said Polly. "I wouldn't stand for that, anyhow."

"You wouldn't," said I, staring at her; "well, drop it. It hasn't happened yet!" And I got out, and went down the street.

It made me pretty sore, what she said. But there was something in it. I was ugly lately. I felt worse all the time — like a vicious dog.

"I don't know what's got into me lately," I said, going down to the Elks. "My digestion's all out of whack. I guess that's it — all right. It must be. I'll have to be a little more careful!"

Two days afterwards I heard from Proctor Billings that our thing would probably go through — price and all. And the thirty thousand dollar a year job for me — if I wanted it!

I felt pretty good, naturally. I stopped into Lembachs for lunch, and I ate more than I ought to — grilled clams, I think it was — that was their specialty. Or something else pretty heavy. When I got through I had to go home. I had one of those bilious headaches again.

"I don't see what it is, Pol," I said, when I got home. "I never used to be like this. My stomach seems to be all shot to pieces."

"You'll find out what it is," she said, "if you keep on going like this much longer."

"You may be right," I said, rolling. "Cripes!" I was in awful pain. "I'll have to cut it out some, I guess. I'll have to get out and eat simpler."

"I'd like to see you!" said Polly. "While you're doing what you are now. I'd like to see you stop, when anybody wants you to — anything!

"No, you won't stop, ever. You'll do exactly

what you please, without regard for me, or anybody else. I — I'd like to pound you," she said, getting red, clenching her fist. "I wish I was strong enough. I'd beat you into a thousand pieces — till you had some sense!

"Oh, Bill," she said, throwing her arms around me again, and reaching up with the other hand, trying to feel my forehead. "Why are you such an idiot?"

And I pushed her away from me.

"Get away," I said. "Let me alone, will you? If there's anything makes me tired it's a woman pawing around you when you're sick!"

"Have it your own way," said Polly, shutting her mouth together and leaving the room.

"You bet I will," I said. And I turned my face over to the wall — and took it, for the next three hours.

There were several days that she and I didn't talk on that main subject to both of us. We kept off it. We always had, on things like that, since we'd lived together.

"That's one thing I *won't* do," said Polly, right after we got married. "We won't have any arguing going on in this house. We're both too quick-tempered. I didn't marry to start a debating society. If anything comes up we can't agree on, we'll just drop it, and cool off." And that's what we always did, or she did — dropped the thing, and cooled off, and kept her mouth shut.

But this thing couldn't be dropped. It came up all at once, and it got going fast, and had to be

settled. Within a week Proctor Billings sent for me to sign up and confirm that option that he could have my stock to hand over to those New York people.

"It's all right," said Polly, when I told her what I was going to do — and her mouth tightened up. "I could stand for it, I suppose! All but one thing!"

"What?"

"Going out to Detroit."

"Don't be an obstinate fool. That's one of the best parts of it for me — in a business way. I'll just be getting good and started when I get out there."

"I won't do it, that's all. I warned you beforehand," she said. "And I won't."

"You won't, eh?"

"No," she said, tightening her lips again. "I won't!"

And we stood and glared at each other.

"I won't," she said — and her face got white, starting around her mouth. "I told you I wouldn't, and I won't. I won't pull everything up again and move — the third time in six years — way out there."

And I didn't say anything for fear I'd be sorry.

"Oh, Bill," she said, almost crying. "Just when we got started so well here. When the children have got their little friends! In three years Junior will be all ready to go to Yale with all the rest of the boys."

"And what else?" I stood and asked her. I

could see there was something beside that; that this was only excuses — the way women do — covering up the main thing. "What else?"

"No, sir," she said, getting kind of hysterical. "I — I won't. I — I won't go to Detroit — and you won't, either! If I've got to bury you — if you can't take the money they offer you and get out and rest, I'd rather stay just where we are and keep the business. I'd rather bury you here where I've got friends, then out in Detroit, where we haven't got any!"

"So that's it," I said. "That's what's on your mind."

"Yes — yes, it is," she said. "If you want the truth, I'm worried to death about you. And you know it."

And then she kind of broke down.

"Well, then, you've got to get over it," I said, keeping away from her. I was going to break her of that, if I could. "Because if I'm sick, it's mostly in your head. Cheer up!" I said. "Your imagination's got loose, and is running away with you. I'm not going to die right off!"

"Well, you wouldn't want to be a half invalid all your life, like Pasc," she said, easing up a little and staring. "Just for nothing at all. Just for rushing around and tearing around for more money — when we've got the chance now to get out, with more money than we will ever know what to do with."

"Well," I said. "If that's all the matter, just get it out of your head! I'm good for a long time yet."

"You don't sleep decently, your digestion's all gone. And you're smoking all the time," said Polly. "I know. You've got to stop it. You're going too fast — just as poor Pasc was. Only in a different way. You have been — faster and faster every year — since this started!"

"Fast your grandmother's foot," said I.

"All right," she said, her voice getting sharp again. "But remember what I say. If you go to Detroit, you'll go alone. I won't, nor the children either. You can go, and kill yourself, if you want to. But I'll stay right here with the children. You can't budge me!"

"We'll see about that," said I, breaking out again. "Not on your life," I said. "You don't dictate like that to me!"

So that next day I signed up and confirmed my option with Proctor Billings — who was to deliver it to the New York people. For he was putting through the whole thing. With my consent. He knew how. They didn't know me in the transaction — those New Yorkers — practically at all; though they did promise me — with Billings' consent — this five years' contract as manager at Detroit of the motor cycle end, that Polly was so rabid over. I went right along. I went over it with my lawyers, and I decided that next day to go ahead under the old agreement — and take the new job at the same time.

"We ought to hear from them — get the money in a month," Billings told me.

I went home that night. I didn't say anything

to Polly, or she to me, about that. I didn't have to. We knew. It certainly was a rotten mess. And it went on that way for almost a week.

We didn't talk much on anything — she and I — just went on living, saying nothing, with this thing always between us. We wouldn't either of us give way, I could see that. She was spunkier and more set than I was, if anything. Daytimes I was away from the house, most of the time. But we slept together in one bed at nights, just the same as always — without scarcely talking to each other, except when we had to — and nothing at all on this one thing we were both thinking of. I woke up one night, and I thought I heard the bed shaking. I thought she was crying to herself — without any noise. And then I made a motion, and it stopped. Two nights after I thought I noticed the same thing.

By this time, if I told the truth to her, I was kind of sick of it all myself. I was feeling kind of rocky anyway, and this row at home didn't help much, when I got to thinking it over. I was almost tired of my bargain already. It seemed to me Polly might be half right about the thing. It might be a kind of fool operation, after all, for us to pull up and go out there to Detroit after living all our lives in this one place and got used to it. And that kind of got me arguing out the whole thing again with myself.

"What's the advantage of it?" I said to myself — lying there, thinking at night, listening to see if she was going to start that silent crying again. "I believe we could have made more money, too, sit-

ting right here, and running the business ourselves.

"Running it ourselves," I said to myself, "and staying here where you're known — and can be somebody! Instead of going out there and be a small toad in a great big puddle. A million ain't so much," I said to myself, "compared to what you'd make here. And what's thirty thousand dollars a year for five years?"

But that wasn't the only thing — or the main thing with me. I began to see that as the days went along. The fact was, when it came right down to it, I hated to give up that business we'd worked so hard to build up.

I felt that way at first — a little. But it kept growing on me. And it grew worse as I saw, right side of us, what Pasc and Zetta were doing with themselves, since he got out — all the time getting worse and worse, until finally it came to that time at their new housewarming.

CHAPTER XXI

THE MISSING RUNABOUT

They had been there several weeks then — in that new house of theirs they'd built next to ours.

Every morning — pleasant days — you'd see Pasc come out and sit around the lawn. Polly used to call my attention to him, before our row became quite so bad.

"You think Zetta's changed," said Polly. "It's been nothing to him. See him," she said. "Isn't it awful. Doesn't he look and act just like an old man!"

"There's nothing to him, any more," I said.

"Sitting, staring off," said Polly.

"Still at it! He's still got that carburetor on his brain," I told her; "that change he's working on for the poor gasolene and for the aeroplane. He can't quite fetch it, I guess."

"Maybe — maybe he never will!" said Polly, watching him, sitting there on a bench he had, under an old maple tree, getting out his stub and scrap of paper again.

"Not so bad as that!" I said. "I guess."

Then she didn't say anything, answering me. "Poor fellow," she said to herself, under her breath. "He always looks so tired."

"Ain't it funny," I said, watching him. "It's burning him up."

"I don't see anything funny about it," said Polly, speaking up.

"It's a queer thing to watch, just the same," I said.

"You can see a carburetor in his eyes, if you look close, so Zetta says," said Polly.

"I believe it," I said. I could almost see from that distance his old pale-blue eyes, peering out from back of those bony cheek bones, searching around a thousand miles off for something they could never quite find. "But he's lucky in one way, at that, to have something to think about. Luckier a lot than I'd be, if I ever had to knock off business."

"Maybe," said Polly, "though I don't believe it. But that's the way it's hard on Zetta. She don't have that either — something to think about. And you never see them together at all. She says she tries her best every day with him, and then gives him up finally to his carburetor."

"And goes off riding with her chauffeur!" I said.

"Yes," said Polly. "Most every afternoon."

"It's a darned outrage," I said, "for her to behave so."

"It doesn't look very nice," Polly answered me.

"Are they still talking about it?" I asked her.

"Yes."

"Just as much as ever?"

"More."

"She's a fool," I said. "Just a plain damned fool — she's gotten to be!"

"It's a shame too," said Polly. "There isn't a thing wrong about her — except this awful restlessness. Like a disease."

"I don't know which is worse," I told her, "being crooked or a plain damned fool. I don't know what does the most damage. I'm through caring about her now, anyhow. The thing I care about is old Pasc, sitting there, chasing his invention around inside his old skull. That's all I care now."

"I don't. I'm sorry for them both," said Polly. "You can't blame it all on her," she said. "He's got to take his share. He and his everlasting carburetor."

"Following around after it," I said, and grinned, thinking.

"Like a man who sees a ghost," said Polly, "beckoning; and has to follow it, in the old stories those old people used to tell."

"And the worst of it is," she said, going back to Zetta again, "you can't stop her. He won't see it — ever; and the more she thinks all the folks talk about her, the more she'll go right ahead, faster than ever, defying them. Everybody's talking — naturally, everywhere."

"Do you think," I said, "they'll turn out — the neighbors around here, anyhow — at that dinner party, when they open up the house?"

"I think so," she answered me. "Probably. With what little we do — and with Mrs. Billings. But she isn't helping us — not very much."

"The reckless fool," I said, thinking of Zetta again. "You can't blame the women exactly! You know what they're calling those two down at the garage — that row of eyes and clean collars and dirty mouths along that wall?"

"No," said Polly.

"The soul mates!"

"They are in a way, too," said Polly. "In one way. Both of them. Both desperate — kind of rebels. You won't see it," she said, "not since you had that row with him — but that boy of Tom's isn't all bad."

"He's bad enough," I told her, "so if you went tearing around with him like that, I'd kill you."

"Maybe," said Polly.

"No maybe to it," said I.

We'd done all we could. I'd gone to Billings, practically, after Pasc had shown me how he'd like it if Zetta could get in with nice people, like Polly had. I'd practically gone and asked Billings if he wouldn't get his wife to help out a little, and come anyhow herself. For they were neighbors practically, you might say — and kind of leaders on High Hill. And what they said went. And Billings said he'd see what he could do. And Polly heard somewhere else that his wife was coming, and even helping out a little — though it came pretty hard.

But Zetta, of course, wouldn't help any — or hardly come half-way; especially when she took a dislike to anybody, the way she had to Proctor Billings' wife.

"You talk about Billings — the human icicle," she said to me, "he's nothing to his wife. Male and female icicles," she said, laughing that harsh laugh of hers, "and (what is it now?) the female is more chilly than the male — or something like that!" And made up a stiff face like Mrs. Billings.

I had to laugh, in spite of myself.

"Let them see me," she said to Polly about the same time, "driving out, if they want to. What do I care? I'll go where I please, and do what I please, so long as I know I'm straight. Whose business is it?"

We two were pretty well worked up, especially Polly, as the day of that party of theirs came on. We weren't sure that we'd get the women to recognize her and come — up to the very last minute.

But the Thomases didn't care apparently. Zet was as indifferent as ever, and old Pasc was around, looking off, with his eyes in a vise, trying to tear that last wrinkle about that carburetor from the back end of his brain somewhere.

It was that way clear up to the day of the dinner party itself. Zetta talked absolutely indifferent. It made you mad almost, when you thought of all the trouble we'd taken for her.

"I don't care. I wouldn't have cared if they'd all stayed away, and hadn't accepted. I wouldn't have done it at all. I wouldn't care that — if it wasn't for Pasc, and you, Honey!" she said. And grabbed Polly in her arms and kissed her.

"But I'll be good. I'll be stiff as any old maid

you ever saw," she said to her, coming around again in that old-time, good-hearted way of hers. "Just tell me what you want me to do, and I'll do it."

And she had done just what she said she would, for days — till that very afternoon of the dinner party.

"Do you know what she's done!" said Polly — when I came home to the house a little early, to see if I could do anything.

"No. What?"

"She's gone out riding this afternoon in that runabout with Tom's boy. Just now!"

"The devilish fool," I said, getting up out of my chair. "Can't she stop for a minute?"

"She told me she just had to."

"Had to! The whole town will have to see her. This afternoon!"

"No," said Pol. "It was pretty near dusk, when they started. Pretty dark."

"It's now four thirty," I said. "Nearer five. Think of it. Two hours before the dinner!"

"The real fact is," said Polly, "she's nervous. She hates meeting them all tonight, like poison — all those women. And she thinks this will set her up — brace her. Give her fresh air!"

"Yes," I said then. "And what if anything happened. If they had a blow-out; or got held up anyway! What's she thinking of? It's dark as night right now!

"What's Pasc doing?" I asked her.

"That's the worst of it," said Polly. "Do you

know what he's doing — really. He's working on that thing of his — now! Today! He's in one of those fits — those trances when he thinks he's discovered something. He's forgotten there is such a thing as a dinner party."

"Sitting there alone," I said, "like an absent-minded child in the dusk."

"Yes. In his room upstairs."

"She ought to be killed," I said.

But I thought, of course, it would come out all right — some way. It was six o'clock, pretty nearly, when Pasc called up and said Zetta and the driver hadn't come yet.

"What!" said I. "Not come!"

I looked around. Polly stood right back of me.

"What is it?" she asked. And I told her.

"You let me talk to him," she said, and took the telephone away from me.

"I'm worried," said Pasc.

"I don't blame you," said Polly. "Now here — listen. I'm coming over to your house, and see that things are going right. I've been there all day, anyhow. And Bill will start right now to see if anything's happened to them. Any tire trouble."

"Well, I wish you would," Pasc told her. "If you feel you can."

"You know we do," said Polly. "You know that's exactly the way we do feel."

"For I'm getting kind of worked up," said Pasc.

"Look," said Polly. "Which way did they go?"

And he told her where he thought. It was a common road they often took, out through the woods — that Rocky Cove road, where she went out to tear off the miles in that fast car. I knew it — a lonely place, but pretty good for a country road.

"Hurry up, Bill!" said Polly. "You haven't got any time." And I ran out to the garage.

"I God," I said to myself, driving out the runabout, "what does this mean?" I didn't know what to think. I knew there was that road house beyond there. I thought of that first — that road was the shortest way there. She might be out there — drinking a cocktail — taking a bracer, and take too much. And yet I couldn't think that either. I'd never seen her drunk — not more than gay at the furthest.

"I don't know what to make of this," I said to myself, scared. "Unless it's an accident."

I was in a nice fix. I didn't want to ask anybody — of course — not near the town anyway, if they'd seen them. And out farther it was too dark anyway. I kept plunging on down the road I thought they'd gone on, trusting to Providence. I kept going. I went deeper and deeper in the woods. And all of a sudden, I turned the corner, and I saw it!

I saw this headlight on the side of the road, tilted up into the trees. And this figure standing in my own headlight. I hadn't more than turned the corner, when it jumped up and stood there — this woman — still, in that dead white light. Held up its

hands — and stood there. And I saw them — those hands!

I held up — with a bump. Both brakes. I saw those hands!

"What is it? What's happened? Are you hurt?" I said, jumping out.

"No," she said, "not a particle."

"Your hands?"

"No." And stood there for a minute, still.

"Look," she said — and started and kind of staggered around. "Look," she said, like a child — showing you something it's found.

And I started after her, down the bank.

"We were going around the corner," she said. "I was thrown!"

The car was clear over — wheels up.

"Look," she said, straining at the side of it. "Can't we raise it?"

"Stop!" I said. "You can't do that! Not in a million years!"

"I tried to get the jack," she said, panting. "But I couldn't get to it."

We talked like people breathing, rather than just speaking — hoarse and whispering.

"Where is he?" I asked her. It was dark under there — in the woods. Black as your hat — except those twisted headlights, cocked up into the trees; and my lights pointing down the road.

"Where is he?" I said.

"Under there! Look," she said. "You can crawl in here." The car was kind of tilted on the bank.

"How long's it been?" I asked her.

"I don't know," she said. "I don't remember. But here!" she said, hurrying — showing me this place where the car lay up against the bank. "I got in there — I got in there! But all I had was matches. They went out — under there — in the wind. I reached him, but I couldn't get ahold of him — to pull him out."

"Wait — wait!" I said. "I've got my pocket flashlight in the car." And I ran over and got it.

"Hurry!" said Zetta. "Hurry! I'll back around your car — till you get that light, too."

And I went down under so I could poke my head in. I could see the matches there, on the ground, where she'd been. And I turned my eyes up. I looked with my flashlight! And I backed right out — quick!

"He didn't seem to breathe," said Zetta — "when I put my hands on him."

"No!" said I. "No! Look," I said, thinking forty times to the second. "Nobody's been here, of course?"

"No."

"And nobody's seen you riding — that you know of?"

"No," she said.

"Sure?"

"It was almost dark when we started."

"Come on!" I told her.

"Come!" she said to me. "Where?"

"Home," I said.

"And leave him there!"

"Come on," I told her. "There's no time to lose."

"But suppose —" she said.

"There's no supposing to it."

"Suppose," she said. "He might be still alive?"

"Alive!" I said. *"That!*

"Come on," I said again. "The first thing you've got to do is get home. He's dead," I said. "You know that — as well as I do! Jump in now!" I said, taking her around the waist, and pushing her toward my car.

"Come on," I told her, when she stopped. "Look — aren't your hands cut — any?"

"No," she said.

"Sure?"

"Yes," she said, and shuddered.

"Wipe them off," I said, "on the grass there — what you can! And come! Come on," I said, starting pulling her again. "Be sensible."

"What are you going to do?" she said, holding back. "Leave him! Leave him!"

"Yes."

"But suppose," she said again.

"There's no supposing about it," I said. "You know it! You saw him!"

And she shivered against me.

"Somebody'll be along in a few hours," I said, pulling her, "anyway. And you can thank God they haven't been along before. Before I did! And now, the quicker we get out of here the better!"

"Where are you going? What are you doing?" she said, resisting me all she could — when I put her in my runabout.

"You're going home," I said, "with me! He's dead. But you aren't. Nor the rest of us! You're going home. You're going home and get ready for that dinner party!

"You know what will happen," I said, holding her, when she started struggling again, "if you ain't there. If they all come there — and find you're out here — in a car, with him — smashed up against a tree — joy riding! You know what it will mean.

"You're no fool," I said. "You know what's been brewing about this — and how long. This will be the end."

"What do I care?" she said to me, in a kind of low voice —"what they say?"

"It isn't what you care," I said, "now. It's what we care — the rest of us. You've got to care — for us!"

But she wouldn't give in still.

"And the newspapers," I said. "Think of it! Smearing it all over the face of the earth — on all of us. Come, you've got to!"

"And sit up there — hours at dinner, and smile!"

"Yes."

"At that Mrs. Billings — and those others — those awful things!" she said, drawing back.

"You've got to. You've got to go home and go through with it."

"No, sir, I can't," she said. "I won't."

"Zet," I told her, taking her wrists. "be a sport. Remember," I said, shaking her. "You ain't the only one that's got a stake in this. Remember the rest of us. Remember Pasc —"

"But what's the use!" she asked me. "What's it for?"

"We're going to take a chance," I said, "that nobody'll ever know that you were here. It's a long one, but we're going to take it just the same."

She let up some on her drawing back. I felt her body yield a little.

"Come," I kept urging, "Zet! You've got to. Think of the rest of us — if you don't of yourself. If you ever want to hold your head up again in this town," I said, "or Pasc! Pasc," I said.

"Come on," she called out all at once, sitting back in the car without my holding her.

"That's right," I told her. "That's the girl. Now," I said, closing the door, "we'll get home as quick as God'll let us. We'll snatch the head of it!"

"Don't talk!" said Zetta, in this strange voice. "Don't talk to me!"

I turned and started — with a bang — jumped into high and went! Around the corner, away from those two bright green spots, those ugly headlights cocked up into the trees — out into the dark! Down the crooked country road we went — I let her out for home — racing as if the devil was after us. Saying nothing, either one of us.

CHAPTER XXII

A HOUSEWARMING

"Bill!" said Zetta, just before we got there.

"Yes."

"Not a word. Not a word to Pasc, until it's over. Unless we have to!"

"You're right," I said.

"I'm afraid he couldn't stand it. He couldn't go through with it — especially the way he's been feeling lately. He'd show it someway."

"What'll we tell him?" I said — thinking for the first time how it was going to affect him — the shock of it.

"You leave that to me," said Zetta.

"What will you tell him about your dress and hands?"

"I'm going to stop at your house a second — and wash up. You go on ahead of me," she said, "so the servants won't see me."

And I got her in — we walked right in, with my latchkey, nobody the wiser.

"Polly's over to your house," I said.

"Get her on the 'phone," she told me, "while I'm washing."

So I did.

"What is it?" said Polly.

"It's all right," I said. "Just tire trouble.

"It was more than that," I said, lowering my voice. "But you tell Pasc that!"

"Yes," said Polly, whispering herself. "She's all right?"

"Absolutely — yes. It's him!" I whispered back. "But now, listen — she's going to walk over now from here, to the side door. She said not to let the servants see her."

"That's all right," said Polly. "That's all right, anyhow. I lied. I told the servants she was over at my house, resting, to get rid of the excitement. But hurry up! Hurry up! Hurry up! There's only half an hour now! And you'd better come over with her, I think — and take care of Pasc for a minute."

"Come now," said Polly, at the door when we got there. "Hurry up. Have you overslept?" she said louder. "You crazy thing?"

And they two went upstairs together.

"What was it, anyhow?" said Pasc.

"Tire trouble," I told him.

"Oh?" he said, back in that absent-minded way again.

"Well, I certainly was glad you helped me out — got her home in time!" he said — as if it was all right, and the most usual thing in the world for a woman to drift in at that time for her first big dinner party in her own house.

"I've got to run back and change my own clothes," I said, when I'd told him that Powers would be back with the car later.

"You're good friends, good neighbors," said

Pasc, letting me out —" you and Polly. I don't know what we'd do without you."

I had to rush my head off — at that, especially without Polly there to help me dressing. I was one of the last ones to get in. Zetta was down — all dressed up and fixed up — and Polly was standing with her.

" Christmas," I said to myself, when I first saw them. " Women certainly are the great things — at a time like this! "

I never saw Zetta look so well in my life — her eyes so bright or her lips so blood red. And I never heard her talk more or easier. And Polly just the same! And yet I could see, myself — looking at her — that she knew! That Zetta'd told her.

It was different with me. I was all in — all over myself. I almost started eating my oysters with a teaspoon, thinking. Thinking of that light, cocked up in the trees, calling for help — and wondering when the telephone would ring. I didn't say anything much.

" She's such a very lively woman, isn't she? " said the woman next to me, looking up — that old man Rutherford's wife that made his money on mail boxes; that woman who gushed so much over everybody, and then went off and bit them in the back.

" Who? " said I, coming back to earth again. I'd just thought I heard the telephone! " Who? Mrs. Thomas? You bet. She's the liveliest thing that ever happened."

" So vigorous," she said.

"Yes," I answered, listening still.

"So vigorous — so full of life. She scarcely knows how to keep it in, does she?" she said, giving me a look to see how I would take it.

It made me shiver, listening, to think what they'd do with her, the women — if they once got their teeth in this thing.

"Bubbling over," she said, sheering off when she didn't get any rise out of me. "Especially tonight, and her dress is so lovely. That wonderful color — so striking!"

"Yes, indeed," said I, talking like an idiot.

I was wondering all the time whether I ought to have left that light going in that car — whether somebody would find it too soon. And yet it wouldn't have worked right — what I wanted to do — unless I'd done just what I did.

I sat listening for that telephone, all the time. Polly had given them orders to call me; she'd told me that just before we started in to dinner. "Look out for it now," she said, "every minute!"

I sat and listened, all the time, like a fireman waiting for a third alarm — taking a glance, every now and then, at my watch, under the table.

"This thing," I said to myself, "ought to be over by eleven o'clock. And it might be they wouldn't run across him, or they wouldn't recognize him till afterwards — way out there ten miles away.

"Lord, I hope so," I said to myself, and hung on, waiting.

"She seems to be having such a lively time to-

night, doesn't she?" said this Mrs. Rutherford. "I love to see her. She's so lovely to look at and kind of unaffected. That's what I like about her. And your wife, Mr. Morgan," she said, laying it on as thick as she knew how. "I think she is so lovely."

"Glad you do," said I, sitting up. For just then the telephone rang.

One of the servant girls they had waiting on them came around and spoke to me.

"Hello," said this big husky voice at the telephone. "Your name Thomas?"

"Yeah," I said, right off — taking a chance at what was coming.

"You missed your car?"

"No. Why?" said I.

"What's your number plate?" he wanted to know.

And I gave him Pasc's.

"That's the one. It's yours all right. That's the one!" said this fellow on the 'phone, talking up as if he was glad to know it. "Your chauffeur's been out this evening -- on a joy ride. Once too often."

"Too often!" said I, after him.

"A red-headed man — a young fellow?"

"That's the one," said I, getting hoarser and hoarser, as I talked.

"Well, he won't bother you any more."

"Why not?" said I.

"He's got his — this time!"

"Got his," I said, hoarser still. "How bad?"

"Dead," said the voice. "All ground up under the car. What'll we do about him," he said, "and the car."

"Who are you?" I asked him.

"The police office," he said, "out in Rocky Cove."

So I told him what to do, and where to send the body, and the car. "I can't come out tonight," I told him. "I'm giving a dinner party."

"Ah-ha," he said. "That's how it happened! He thought he'd take the car out on you? You'd think they'd learn more, after awhile, but they don't!"

"I can't get out," I said. "But you take care of me, will you — neighbor," I said to him; "all you can? I can't get out, so I'm going to ask you to look out for us. Take care of me, will you?" I repeated. "We all need a friend now and then," I told him.

"You bet we do," said he.

"Well, this is the time I need one. Your time might come later."

"That's right too, Mr. Thomas," said he.

"Well, you'll know where to find one," I said, and he didn't say anything.

"All right then; I leave it to you. You won't lose anything by it," I said. And I got his name. "And if you want to know anything later, and call again, just call for William Morgan."

"I know," said the voice again.

"He's the man who'll take care of you."

"All right, boss."

"I won't forget this," said I. "I ain't that kind."

"Don't mention it, Mr. Thomas," said the cop.

"And oh — say!" I said. "Don't say anything about it to the newspaper boys yet! Hold it up a little for us. Don't give it out to the newspapers until after we're through here."

"How long?"

"Oh, say eleven thirty."

"Sure."

"And when you do send them around, or have them call — have them call for Morgan, too, see?"

"Sure. I'm on," said the cop at Rocky Cove.

I knew that was all right there, anyway. And I went back and sat down again. I found myself sticking my napkin in at my neck, and Polly glaring at me, before I caught myself.

"Business, I suppose," said this Mrs. Rutherford, next to me, making eyes. "Oh, you men — you men!" she said, getting giddy. "Can't you let it alone for a minute?"

And we went on through it all. I'm proud of it sometimes — right through from oysters to cigars, sitting there, we three, pushing her through like little majors — Zetta and Polly making a better show than I ever saw them. Right up in G, laughing and talking. I kept watching them to see what I was going to do, whenever there was any doubt.

And finally we got them all out to the front door — every one of them.

"Listen," I said to Billings, catching him on the piazza, as he was going. "There's been an acci-

dent while we were in here. That damn fool chauffeur — you know, that Powers — has taken advantage and been out on a joy ride with their runabout — and killed himself!"

He whistled to himself. "Dead!" he said.

"Deader than a smelt," I told him. "Under the car. I got it on the 'phone."

"They don't know it," he said — "the family?"

"No," I said. "I got up and answered the 'phone myself. You saw me."

"Yes."

"It wouldn't do," I said. "It wouldn't do for the women to know — while this was going on."

"No," he said — and stopped, thinking. "Dead!" he said, and whistled again, and lifted up his eyebrows. "You did exactly right," he told me.

"But now," I said, "of course, when you're out, I wish you'd tell Mrs. Billings; and you two can tell any of the others — if you think it's the best thing. I'll leave that to you," I said.

"It serves him right," said Billings, looking at me, thinking it out, "in a way; that kind of chauffeur, taking an expensive car out like that — without your consent. It's a lesson, to the rest of them. You can't be sure now whether you've got a car left or not. I'll tell Mrs. Billings," he said, and went off to his car.

I saw that end of it was all right, too. Mrs. Billings would tell everybody first; and that would be the story that she'd tell — and stick to, whatever happened.

And right after that the newspaper boys called, and I gave them the right steer.

"I'm speaking for Mr. Thomas in this," I said, coming to the door. They all knew me, of course.

"You can't see him," I said. "He's all broken up by this thing. You know what that boy did for us, when we first started — riding a machine. He thought the world of him, and it's got him pretty bad. He ain't very well, just now, anyway.

"Come on over to the house, boys," I said, "just across the lawn, and I'll tell you all about it."

So I took them over, and handed out the cigars, and sat down with them, and gave them their story.

"That's what comes of being a Speed King," said the tall, long-legged one, with the pale face, and black stringy hair, who pocketed my cigar and smoked his own cigarettes.

"You've got that right!" said I.

"They all get it, sooner or later," said another one.

"Right," said I, and tapped him on the shoulder.

"There's a good story in that," said the white-faced one, with the black hair — the older one. "The New York papers would take that. He had quite a reputation as a rider."

"Yes, but keep it down, boys, all you can, will you? It would be a great favor to us. I don't want to dictate to you, but you can see how we all feel about it. It was an awful shock — happening just while this party was going on, full blast, and everything.

"Do what you can, boys, anyway," I said. "And any time you want anything more on it," I said, "you just come to me. Do that much. Mr. Thomas ain't well at all."

"Sure," they said. "We'll see to that."

"And any time I can do anything else for you, boys," I told them, letting them out the door, "you come right to me. Don't you hesitate a minute. Ease up on this, boys," I said, "what you can. I'll appreciate it, and I might be able to do something for you sometime. You never can tell."

I saw then that that was all right — watching them. They hadn't gotten anything, and they wouldn't, unless something slipped.

So I went back again to Pasc's house.

"We've got it fixed, I guess," I said to Polly, in the front hall —"my end. How is it here? How about the servants?"

"They don't know anything about it," said Polly. "They believe me — what I told them, that she was over to our house."

"Then we've done it," said I. "We've kept the thing quiet." And I sat down in the chair in the hall and wiped my forehead. "Cripes, what a wrestle!"

It seemed as if I'd been stretched out on a rack for months.

"They in there?" I whispered, after a minute, nodding toward the library.

And she nodded back.

"She told him?" I whispered. "How did he take it?"

"Pretty hard," said Polly. "He's terribly broken up."

"About what?" I said, whispering. "About the boy?"

And Polly nodded her head again.

And then I heard Zetta's voice in the other room, as if she'd just heard me come in. "Bill," she called, "is that you? Come in here. And you too, Polly."

So we went in. Pasc sat there, hunched up in the chair. She stood there before him, waiting — standing up with that gay expensive flame-colored dress on — her shoulders white, and her face, and her great wonderful lot of dark hair over it.

"Now you're here, Bill," she said, standing straight and still, "I want to thank you for — tonight. Something I guess I can never thank you for — really. You saved me — my reputation, Bill. I can see that now. I appreciate it."

And Pasc made a noise in his throat, as if he was trying to say something and couldn't.

"Oh, forget it, Zet," I said. "It's been a hard night for all of us. What we need now is bed."

But she stood there, not moving, looking at me, standing stiff, with the white rims of her eyes showing all around those deep black pupils.

"That isn't all, Bill," she said, holding out that smooth white arm of hers — for me to stay there. "That isn't all. Now I've said that — now it's done — I want to know something else. I want to ask you something — all of you. But you and Pasc especially.

"Did either of you ever think I was crooked with that boy?" she said, looking me straight in my eyes.

"Zetta!" said Pasc, with a kind of hoarse voice, coming up on to his feet.

"Zet," I said. "For God's sake!"

"I mean it," she said.

"Zet," I said, warning her with my eyes — trying to, about Pasc. "You must be crazy. What makes you ask such a question? What do you think we are?"

"Because I had to," she went on, paying no attention to me. "Because you might think something else. You had a right to."

"A right to!" Polly cried out loud. I caught my breath, staring.

"Yes," said Zetta, watching me. "Because you were right, and I was wrong."

"What about?"

I looked at Pasc. His face was terrible, waiting to hear.

"About him!" she kept on. "About that — you told me."

I stood stock-still; we all did — waiting. Pasc looked like a man you see sometimes struck in the head.

"I was driving," she said in this low voice, like somebody talking in their sleep. "Rather fast. Coming back. He had been perfectly still — all the ride.

"All at once," she said — and her face got redder than that flame-colored dress. "All at once,

"THAT'S WHY I THOUGHT YOU WERE ALWAYS WRONG — BECAUSE YOU HATED HIM!" *Page* 291.

he tried — he tried —— He said something. He must have been crazy!"

I watched Pasc. It was awful. His eyes, and his face, like old yellow wax — all the blood out of it. But she went right along. "He must have been crazy!" she said, stopping, and looking ahead of her.

"Or drunk," I said, cursing him.

"I struck him," she said, staring at me, for breaking in on her. "In the face. I forgot — everything. I struck him. Both hands! Just as we hit the corner. I killed him, I killed him!" she said. "And I'm glad of it!"

"Forget it," I said. "The damned dog. He isn't worth it."

"I do," she said, her breast rising and falling. "I will. But I've got to say this now."

I looked at Pasc. The blood had started coming back in his face now — with a rush.

"Never before!" she said, staring straight at me. "In all that time. Not a word from him. Not a suggestion. He was like a young boy I always knew, and wanted to be good to. Never before — till tonight. Not one sign. Do you believe me?"

"Certainly I believe you," I said. "Why wouldn't I?"

"In all that time," she went on. "That's why I thought you were always wrong — because you hated him! But that's why now — I thought, now — you *thought,* perhaps —" she said, and faced me.

"Never in my life!" I answered, looking her in the eyes.

If you'd ever had an idea she was wrong, you wouldn't any longer, looking into those eyes.

"And nobody else that knew you," said Polly.

"I was a fool!" she said. "I was a fool! But did you ever — any of you, think *that* about me for a minute?"

"Zetta!" said Polly. "How could you say that!"

"Never," I said. "For a minute."

"I wanted to know!" she said, and her lips twitched, just a little, for the first time. "It means something to me — with you three!"

"Zet," I said, speaking with my lips — and moved my head over a little! "Pasc!"

For I'd seen him standing there then — catching at the table.

He began to sink back towards his chair. But he'd hardly slouched back into it, before she was at him,— all over him.

"Pasc," she said, clutching at him, "Pasc! Have I hurt you? Have I hurt you, Pasc? Have I hurt you?"

And Polly ran upstairs for the spirits of ammonia.

He came right around again.

"It's time we went home," I said to Polly, after a few minutes. "You don't want me to help you upstairs, or anything?" I asked Pasc.

"No," he said, with that quick old disappearing smile of his. "It's nothing."

"I'll get him up. I'll take care of him," said Zetta. She looked bigger and stronger than he did at that.

So we let ourselves out of the house, and she stayed there with him in the library. When we got our things on, and went by their door, through the hall, she was there beside him on her knees, kind of straining him to her. Patting him on his cheeks — like a little girl pats her doll, or a young kitten, or anything it thinks is weak and needs mothering.

"Whew! God!" I said to Polly, when we two were outside.

"Did you notice him?" she asked me.

"Why?"

"He acted to me just like a man who's had a little shock."

"He did to me for a second," said I —"just for the minute. But I don't believe he did."

"It won't help him any," said Polly. "His health. That's the way you'll be some day!" she said — all of a sudden; her voice getting sharp. "If you keep on going."

"Drop it!" I said. "Don't you start that to-night!"

And we let ourselves in the house, and went upstairs, and went to bed.

I just lay there and rolled around. And suddenly I sat up! And wanted to light up. I saw that thing I saw with my pocket searchlight under the automobile.

"What is it?" said Polly, sitting up too. "Can't you get to sleep, any way?"

"No more than you can," I said.

"I know," she said.

"It served him right!" I said, finally — to say something about him. I had to!

Polly lay still, and said nothing.

"It served them both right in a way."

But she didn't answer yet — anything; lay there thinking, apparently.

"What a mess it's been," I said —"the whole thing. If he'd been satisfied to go to work,— that boy, like other people. If she hadn't had to go chasing around like a crazy woman, top speed, a hundred miles an hour, hurrying around, looking for excitement — all the time out after something new — this thing would never have happened.

"But after all," I said, rolling back again, "why should we care? He just got what was coming to him — the damned dog!"

"No," said Polly, finally — lying still — answering after awhile, speaking with long breaks in her talk — the way she did when she was thinking. "No. He wasn't to blame — entirely — nor she."

"He wasn't," I said —"or she! Who was, then?"

"Everything," she said — thinking.

"Everything!"

"The life we lead — the speed we've all been going at."

And she stopped — and lay absolutely still.

"Speed," she said then, after awhile. "All of us. Faster and faster — all together! Speed!" she said. "Everywhere — everywhere — always.

Faster, faster — just a little faster! It seems sometimes as if we were all going crazy."

And then she kept still.

I lay there — on my back, staring till morning — seeing that boy of Tom's there under that car.

CHAPTER XXIII

A MILLION DOLLARS — HUH!

I was raw, every way, those next few days — all over; as if I had been scrubbed bleeding with sandpaper. We had it all covered up — about Zetta and the accident — so far as the newspapers and the rest were concerned. I was sure of that the next day.

But I couldn't get the thing off my mind — especially after Polly and I had been down the next morning to see Tom Powers and his wife.

Pasc wasn't any better for the thing, either,— though he claimed he was all right enough, after a day or two. But I could tell from his motions around the yard, and more so after Polly called my attention to it. He didn't walk right, she claimed — not quite straight, after that. I never could tell, myself, whether it was her imagination or not.

My mind kept turning day and night. I lay nights thinking this thing over — the business, and my selling out and going to Detroit to live, and my row with Polly. The more I thought of it all, the sorer I got; and the more I wished I'd just stayed there, in the place where I was born, and run my own business that I'd built up myself.

"What's a million dollars," I said, "any different than what I've got now? I'll have to reinvest

it somewhere and lose it maybe! And what will I do myself? I'll go out there, under these fellows, and be somebody else's hired man, when I'd been used to running my own business to suit myself. How sure do you suppose they'll be to keep me, after my contract's up? How do I know how I'll get along, working under somebody else?"

I got sorer every time I thought of it, and sicker of my bargain. And I felt rotten — especially after that thing happened. My digestion wasn't any better. I was all out of joint everywhere — uglier than a bear; and worst of all when I was in talking the change over — the arrangements for the transfer of the business — with Proctor Billings. He was so devilish cold and fishy about the whole thing — and particularly some of the folks that had worked with us a good while, and couldn't get out to Detroit. He didn't care a hoot what did become of them.

I remember asking him, as one special favor, to keep old Tom Powers at something — because he couldn't break loose at his age, naturally — and his lifting up his eyebrows and saying that he'd see!

"That's the way they get," to myself, "when they've always had everything; and never knew what it was to be down with the rest of the folks. They ain't human."

He sat there, still and polished, beside his vase of flowers on his desk. Orchids, they were now — his new orchids, from his own greenhouse. He got on me wrong, all the time — but especially that last day!

I went over from the bank to the office in my machine, and found two fellows waiting for me there, two men in the automobile business I knew pretty well — one from New York and one from town. And I took them out to lunch.

"What do you say if we go over to Lembachs'," I said, "and get some of Hansie's Wurtzburger?"

And they said that suited them.

"Now what do you see, boys?" I said, when we got there. "Look her over. Guilford clams, deviled crabs — or say a porterhouse. They're all good, eh, Hansie?" said I.

"Sure!" said the old Dutchman, nodding.

"I'll take a plain porterhouse," I said, "when it comes to me. But nix on the beer, Hans. Get me a good stiff drink of rye — a good one. You know! I guess that'll fix me. I'm uglier than the devil's grandmother. I'm all out of joint, still."

"You ugly!" they said, jollying me. "You've got a fine right to be ugly. Just knocking down a million, or two — and a whale of a big salary!"

"Well, I've a good right to be up in the air some," I said; "you'd think so, if you knew what I'd been through lately."

I still felt as mean as a man could. And I sent out Hans to the bar for another whiskey.

"This steak is bum," I said, pushing it away. "Can't you cook anything here, any more?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Morgan; can't I get you something else," said old Hans, fussing around.

"No. Nothing," I said. "You can't cook here,

that's all. You're on the skids — the whole place. Get me a cigar."

And I put down my other whiskey.

"Gee, you have got a grouch on today," said Chunky Newman.

"Everything's going to sixes and sevens with me over this thing," I said. "Laugh. Go ahead, damn you. But it's so. For fifty cents," I said, "I'd chuck the whole thing over. My wife is crazy about going. We're in a regular cat and dog row over it. And I'm sorry myself about pulling up — breaking up everything, and leaving. And when you come down to it, I believe I've made a mistake. I believe you'd say so, if you were in my place."

"Sure. Yes," said Chunky, laughing till his collar choked him. "I wouldn't take their million dollars. I'd slap them in the face with it. Take it away!" he said, laughing and choking up again. "Take it away!"

"That's all right," I said. "But I believe right now, it was too little money. I believe I could sit right here, and make more for myself finally than go out and be somebody else's hired man in Detroit. I mean it.

"And there's another idea," I said then, "you fellows don't get. But it counts — just the same. You've got to remember, we made this business — right here. Pasc Thomas and I. It was our baby, and we raised it; and, by Cripes, it don't come so easy now to give it up, boys, when you come right down to doing it."

"Listen," said Chunky. "This is a new one. Bill's getting sentimental in his old age."

"Maybe I am," I said; "I don't know. But that's the way I feel.

"And there's still another thing, too, that's been getting me lately — worse and worse; and that's that Proctor Billings. He gets on my nerves. He's as cold blooded as a mermaid's mother-in-law. I don't like him, I never did."

And I told them a little about the way he was, about the old employees in the plant.

"I never did like that kind of fellow," I said. "You can't really trust him. And I've always got my suspicions of him, too. I've always got a sneaking idea he's getting more out of this thing, right now, than I am. I couldn't prove it probably, but I believe he is."

"It wouldn't be him," said Doc Snyder, "if he didn't."

"He ain't human, I know that," I said, thinking of that morning — and our talk over the business.

"I suppose," I said, "there's nothing to it. I suppose it will go through, and these fellows down your way — those great big bankers have got to get it, and put it together with that other thing, that big one."

"They're the big fellows, all right," said Chunk. "Top notchers. What they say goes."

"They're big people — yes," said I. "But look what a cinch they've got. They've got a regular machine, stretched out all over the country, even

in places like this They and the local men are watching all your loans, monkeying with you. Getting the inside dope on everything that happens in the country."

"That's right too," said Doc Snyder.

"I'd like to know about them," I said —"how they work. I'd like to get a look into that game. I've got some idea now how fellows like Billings in a town like this operate — get up and declare themselves in on everything that comes along. I've got my finger in, once or twice myself. But these Wall Street bankers — these ten-million-dollar boys, from that lower end of New York, get me. I'd like to get a look into that big game once!"

"A great big game," said Doc Snyder.

"You bet it is," I said. "They never seem to stop. Sooner or later they seem to get their fingers into every good thing in the whole country. I'd like to learn it. I'd like to take a crack at it. And I could learn it, I believe — and you could. We're not so damned much duller than these fellows at that, if we got their start. I'd like to get down there, and try it some time. I bet I'd put some salt on their tails before they got away from me — some of those fly birds!"

"I don't know about that," said Doc.

"Well, I do," I said, "if you don't. I'm not afraid of them. I don't care two hoots in hell for the whole outfit. You and I are their equals, when you come down to it."

"I bet you could at that, Bill," said Chunk, patting me on the back. "You could take care of

them. But you'd better stick to your own trade at that."

"I agree with you, there," I said. "That's what I'm talking about now. That's what I wish I'd done — stayed home here.

"And there's still another thing," I said —"I'm thinking of: what do I want to go out to Detroit for, where I don't know anybody and haven't got a friend, even to the fellows that will work for me?"

"You'll make plenty," he said.

"I don't know," I told him. "But yet, if I just sold out and stayed here, what in Judas' name would I do with myself?"

"Look here," said Chunk to me, "do you mean to say you'd get out of it, if you could — now?"

"I sure would," I said, getting sorer and sorer the more we talked about it. "If I could, I'd go right over there now to that icebox in the bank, and see Proctor Billings, and call it off. If I ever found a loophole — if I ever caught him doing me the slightest way; turning something extra out of this for himself — I could break this thing wide open in a minute by agreement. And I'd do it too!"

The more I talked, the more I felt that way.

"You can't help him besting you some," said Doc Snyder.

"Why not can't I?"

"Well, he's got to make some extra through his bank."

"Placing Universal Motors stock locally, you mean," said I. "You can't help that."

"Yes. But there's something more than that in it, for him," he said. "So I understand."

"What's that?"

"There's an extra per cent. or two in it for him, the other fellows that place it don't get — for his bank."

"What's that for?" said I.

"What would it be for? Just a little grease; a little salve on the side for putting your deal over."

"Like hell it is," I said.

"Oh, you can't beat 'em," said Chunky, laughing.

"I got that straight," said Doc Snyder to me. "From a man who ought to know."

"Is that right?" I said.

"It sure is," he told me.

"We'll see about that," I said. And I got my hat, and got up — right away.

"Where are you going," they both asked — scared.

"I am going to see Billings," I said, "now!"

"Come here," said Doc. "Sit down!"

"Let me loose," I said. "What do you think I care for him?"

"It wouldn't be that, now!" said Chunky, getting my other arm. "You'd be up against something different now — from Billings!"

"What do I care for them?" I said. "They can't scare me."

"Come here, Bill," said Doc, pulling at me. "Sit down. You're crazy with the heat. You can't afford to get out against those people! Or

anybody else! They're the biggest thing in this country."

"Why not, can't I?" said I, pulling away.

"Because they're too big. You can't afford to get them out against you; and get them mad."

"You watch me," I said.

"Bill, you wild fool," said Chunky. "Don't — don't! You don't know what you're up against. They'd crack you like a flea between two finger nails."

"I'll show you whether they will or not," I said. And I broke away from them. "They can't scare me," I said.

"Well," they told me, "if you're going to be such a lunatic, don't bring us into it."

"Don't fret," I said. "I won't. I'll take care of you — and them too."

And I started out.

I wasn't drunk a particle. I was as straight as a string. I was just ugly — from that pain from my indigestion, and those two drinks of whiskey in me without the slightest effect on it, except to make it worse. I was just plain ugly. I walked right over to Billings' bank, all primed — ready to eat raw rattlesnakes.

"If he's double-crossed me," I said to myself, "here's where he hears something!"

And I went out back into that still room, where the little pictures of sheep were, that private reception room outside his door.

"I want to see Mr. Billings," I said to that secretary of his. "And I want to see him right now!"

"You may have to wait," he said, staring at me.

"Wait, hell!" I said. I just jerked him aside and went in.

"What is this?" asked Proctor Billings, standing up and looking at me, with that mean, lean face of his a little white.

"How-do-do," I said. And sat down. I wasn't drunk a particle. I may have been just a little touched, but nothing more than that. I know it. I was just pure ugly.

"I want to ask you something," I said, sticking my finger out at him.

"Well?" he said, still standing up.

"Are you putting anything over on the side on me," I said, "in this deal of ours?"

"What do you mean?" he said, stiffening up. "I refuse to answer such a question."

"You remember that part in that agreement of ours; that one, if we sold out, we sold together, split equally — share and share alike! And if there was anything wrong, by either of us, it bust the option, and we went back to where we were."

"I do."

"That holds, don't it?"

"Yes," he said, sitting down finally, watching me.

"Well, I just heard today you were getting an extra rake-off through your bank."

"I don't care for your way of expressing it much," said Billings.

"All right," I said. "We'll express it any way you want to. But I want to know. Do you, or

don't you, get something extra for your bank out of this?"

"I'm placing some of the Universal Motors' securities here, as you know — when they're issued," he said, giving me those blank steel eyes again.

"I know that," I said. "Now we're getting at it. But we ain't quite there. Did you," I said, "or didn't you, get an extra percentage that other banks selling that stock didn't get, because you made that agreement, when you sold out your part of our stock to them?"

"If I did — or the bank — what then?" he said, not moving his steel eyeballs or his still face a fraction of an inch.

"I'll tell you what then," I said. His frozen face didn't make any impression on me. "If you did, you've broken your agreement with me, and this whole thing's off.

"I built up this thing — another man and I. It's my business. It's me — just as if it were part of me — built into me. I worked and sweat and bled for it, and built it up. And when I get it along where you want it, you come and declare yourself in, and now you'll take it and sell it and double-cross me on the proceeds. You may think you will; but you won't! You've got the wrong pig by the tail this time. You don't know me!" I said, and pounded on the chair.

"Are you through," he said, looking at me — colder and whiter than ever. "If you are, I'll tell you something. Whatever this bank gets or doesn't

get, is my concern, my friend, and that of the other stockholders in it — not yours."

"It is, eh?" I said. "Well, I'll show you different. I'll show you I'm not the kind that'll lay down and let you walk over them. I'm a different kind of a boy."

"Don't start on your personal history again," he said. "It doesn't interest me."

"It don't, eh?" I said. "Well, I'll tell you something that will interest you. This agreement of ours to sell our stock is off — from now on. Because you've broken it. I've been kind of sick of this for some time. I knew I wasn't getting what I should, but I stuck because I said I would. But now this rake-off of yours let's me out. It gives me just the loophole I was looking for. Now you've broken it, you can take the consequences. I'm through. This business will stay just as it was under our old three-year agreement."

"What about your written option through me to these New York people?" he asked me, cool as ever.

"It's off," I said, looking him in the eye.

"With a million dollar offer," he asked, "for your stock? And your salary?"

"All off," I said, "I'm through."

"Is it?" said Billings. "Are you sure?" he said, getting up on his feet. "If I were you I'd give it a little more thought. I'd go off and let my head clear."

"If I were you," I came back, mocking him — when he said that to me, "if I were you, I'd give

my face a vacation. Cripes," I said, looking at him, "I should think, once in a while, once a year anyway — you'd take a vacation off somewhere, and have one good natural expression on your face. Go off and enjoy yourself — let loose one smile. Be a devil of a fellow, and have one good honest smile. And give that damned, still, polite treacherous face of yours a rest!"

"It may be," he said, going on as if he hadn't heard me, "it maybe you're making a mistake. It may be some time before you'll have a million dollars offered to you again for that stock of yours — when you let this go!"

His face was white — and his eyes were harder than ever. I got up myself — red-hot now, uglier than ever at him — waiting there, beside his vase of flowers — hinting to me that I was drunk, and that I'd better get out.

"We'll see about that," I said. "A million dollars!" I said. "That ain't the only million dollars in the world."

"Do I understand you don't want it?" he said, colder and stiller all the time."

"That's what you do!" said I. "Exactly. Yes. That's what I do mean. You can take your million and poke it in your eye. My property is worth more than that to me — right now. And you've broken your option to take it."

He was getting whiter and whiter all the time, I noticed, and finally he broke loose, cutting out every word with his lips, like a die.

"You've swelled up too much, my friend," he

said to me. "You've gone too far, too fast, the last few years. You think you can do about what you please, but you're mistaken. You can't play fast and loose with signed agreements. You've reached your limit. You've run into something you don't understand.

"And now," he said, standing there, looking supercilious at me, "if I were you, I'd go straight home, and take a cold plunge."

"If I were you," I said, "I'd go sit down." And I pushed him in his chest with my open hand, over on that vase of flowers on the desk.

"You quarrelsome barnyard brute," he said, straightening up, and pointing to the door. "You'll pay for this. Now get out! Go!"

And he took out his handkerchief to wipe the water off him from the vase. I had to laugh. "Pay for it!" said I. "Go. For you!"

And stepped up to him again.

"I caught you in the act finally, my friend," I said. "I've got you with your hands in my pockets. It's no go. You can't do it. You can't sell me out, according to our agreement — or yourself either — now.

"Just for greens," I said, drawing off at him. "I'd like to hand you one once. I've owed it to you for some time."

And he crowded back on his desk again.

"But I won't," I said. "Don't be afraid. I won't hurt you, like I would a man. I wouldn't dare to, for fear you'd splash. You ain't a man," I said. "You're nothing but a kind of still soft

bug, that grows where they keep money — a fat white worm that grows on greenbacks.

"You!" I said, keeping him backed back. "You soft-handed, white-fingered, hard-faced crook," I said. "You and your options, and your sleight-of-hand performances, and your ten-million-dollar boys from New York, and what they'll do to me! Bring them on," I said. "I'm not afraid of you — the whole bunch of you. Bring them on," I said. "I'll fight. I'll fight the whole outfit."

And I went out and left him sitting on his desk — on an orchid.

"A million dollars, huh!" I said, when I got in the street. "I'd rather have my little old business any day!"

CHAPTER XXIV

MY LAWYER

I got the best lawyer I could. I went right over from the bank, and told him my case, and told him I wanted to fight it. He whistled a second or two. "They're big people!" he said.

"I wouldn't be afraid of them," I told him, "if they were twice as big."

"I don't doubt that," he said.

"Have I got a case?" I asked him.

"I'm not going to say that," he said, looking at me, the way lawyers have — bluffing, when they don't really know. "That I'll let you know later. But I expect from what you say, you might make them some trouble, especially just now at this stage of the game, when they want to get this into their new concern right away."

"That ain't enough," I said. "I believe I've got a case that'll beat 'em!"

"You don't want to compromise," he said, looking at me, "for a little more money?" He kind of grinned — hinting that I was holding them up for more.

"No," I told him. "That ain't it, now. What I want is to keep where I am now. And buy out Billings myself, when we get this thing broken — if he can be gotten to sell out to me."

"Well, we'll see," said my lawyer.

"I want you to jam it," I said.

"I understand," he said to me.

And I went over to tell Polly about it.

"I — I was afraid you'd do something like that," she said, her face whiter and her voice sharper than it had been before.

"You ought to be satisfied," I said to her. "You've got your own way. You don't have to go to Detroit."

"I'd rather go to Detroit than this."

"Good God," I said, "why? Is there anything you women can be reasonable on? First, you say you won't go to Detroit, and now you say you don't want to stay here. What do you want, do you know?"

"You know what I want," she said. "I want you to stop. Not get into more trouble and rows and hard work! I want you to stop, before you kill yourself."

"Kill myself," I said, "that's likely. A man as strong as I am!"

"Or somebody else. The way you did this morning! That shows you," she said, "whether you're all right; whether you're fit to go on with your work. The way you're going now. D-do you think you'd have done that — five years ago . . .?"

"Oh, shut up," I said, getting tired of hearing her. "When it comes to changes, think of yourself. Your nose and your tongue get sharper every day."

"Or say that to me!" she said, staring in my eyes,

and then turning and going upstairs — and locking herself in her room.

"I tell you what I'll do," I said, going upstairs afterwards. For I knew I'd been acting ugly as sin about the thing. "I tell you what I'll do with you —" when she let me into her room upstairs finally. "I'll go and see a doctor — if that'll do you any good."

"If you did," she said, coming around so that she looked at me a little, "you probably wouldn't believe what he told you, or do anything about it."

"That depends what he told me," I said, jollying her along, trying to make her feel better. "I wouldn't have him send me abroad for a year, traveling — the way he did Pasc."

The doctor had started him off that week — right after the accident. Or the doctor and Zetta had together.

"He says that was a good deal of a shock to him," said Zetta to me —"with his nerves as they were anyway. And he thinks it may tend to take his mind off his carburetor — or whatever he's got it on now. The doctor says that only for this thinking night and day, about these ideas of his, he'd be all right. And maybe over there, after awhile, he could drop them and rest.

"What'll happen," she said, with a kind of flash of her old way, "we'll go and sit on the Alps and think about it there. It's just as well, too. He's never planned a carburetor on the Alps. It would be a new experience to him."

And she laughed.

"And for me too," she said. "But I want him to go," she said, looking up with those straight eyes of hers. "I want to do everything I can to get him on his feet. He — he don't get any better," she said; and got up all of a sudden and went away.

"She acted scared about him — to me," I said.

"She is," said Polly.

"She's changed, herself, quite a lot, since that happened," said I.

"Yes," she told me. "A good deal more subdued."

"I like her better," I said. "And I like to see her back with Pasc more again — looking after him."

"She's always thought her eyes of him," said Polly.

"She didn't always act that way," said I.

"There's a limit," she answered me, "even for a woman."

"Do I take that twice?" I asked her.

"Twice?"

"Once for him, and once for me."

"If you want to," she said.

And we went over that next week, and saw them start, and shut up that brand new house of theirs.

"I God," I said, when they were gone, "I'd certainly like that, traveling around the face of the earth to keep alive — and keep from thinking of your business."

"You may know something about it sometime," said Polly. And she asked me then, for the dozenth time, if I'd seen that doctor yet.

I was a little surprised — I must say — when I did see him. I knew I was feeling off color some, my stomach and my sleep, but it never struck me there was anything very dangerous about it.

"The best of them come to it," he said, "sooner or later, the way we Americans live. You've got to quit, that's all — or you'll quit some day, all of a sudden!"

"What did he say to you?" said Polly, looking in my face the minute I came into the house.

"Oh, nothing much," I said, feeling kind of blue over it. "Only my nerves and digestion."

"Didn't he say it was worse for a big, full-blooded man like you?" she asked me.

"How did you strike on to that?" said I.

"Who wouldn't," said Polly, "that had any sense? Didn't he say you'd have to quit — the kind of thing you're doing now?"

"Well, he told me I wanted to take care of myself," I said. I wasn't going to tell her everything he said.

"And get out of too much extra work and excitement?"

"Well, something like that," I said.

But I lied to her some. I wouldn't tell her it was anything very much, naturally, especially when I was tied up with that lawsuit, and had to see it through.

I was having quite a little discussion with my lawyer over it. "It's all right, I guess," he said. "I can make a fight, of course — hold it up, as I told you."

"We certainly can keep them from getting my stock, anyhow."

"Well, yes," he said. "I don't think the difficulty will come there."

"And we can stop him from giving final title to his—under our agreement," I said. "I don't see why not."

"I don't know!" he told me. "You've got to prove a good deal."

"I don't see it," said I.

"As far as delivering your stock goes, there may not be any trouble. They may not even try to press you there at all."

"Why not?"

"They'll have the majority of the company without it. If their theory of the case holds."

"It won't," I said, "I don't believe it."

"Well," he told me. "You've got to face it, for the court may uphold them. It's quite likely to. You can never tell. They've got a good case, and they seem pretty confident of it. And if they win —"

"I'm a minority stockholder — I understand that!"

"Exactly. And more than that," he said, "I've got a feeling — I've had it for some time — they might be out to punish you — if they once get you — for what they consider a breach of faith."

"What could they do to me?"

"Nothing. Sit still. Put you under pressure,

maybe. Absent treatment!" he said and laughed.

"You mean you'd settle?"

"They're big people," he told me.

"Ah-hah," I said. "You fight!"

CHAPTER XXV

A TRAVELER RETURNS

We would have, too, if it hadn't been for that cable from Pasc Thomas. I got it that very next day — from Liverpool.

"Hold up," it said, "everything on suit. Back first boat. Answer."

"What's this?" I said to myself when I first got it. "Pasc Thomas' coming into this thing! This is something strange and new."

I couldn't make any sense out of it. He hadn't been in this row at all, in any way.

But I answered him — and said I'd wait. I would, naturally, if Pasc asked me to. I'd have stood on my head till he came. But I couldn't guess what he had on his mind.

He looked pretty bad, I thought, when I met them and brought them up to our house. It bumped me a little seeing him. The trip had been hard on him, Zetta said. He didn't take to the ocean very well. He had that kind of settled, solemn look, a pretty sick man gets, now, most of the time.

"I guess you'll think I'm crazy, coming back here," he said, when we went off and sat down in my library together. And when he said it, he peeled off another piece of his old slippery elm, and put the rest back in his pants pocket. And I laughed.

"Well, that looks natural," I said.

And then he grinned, and went on and told me what brought him back; about this young fellow he met on the boat, from that big New York banking house of ours.

"One of the firm?" I asked him.

"Yes, the one that had charge of this Universal Motors deal. He wasn't more than forty-two or three," he said. "He didn't look more than thirty-five.

"He'd heard about me," said Pasc, "it seems, and he wanted to talk to me — about that new Universal Company, and about the principles of gas engines in general, and what improvements to expect. He was a smart one — smarter than a steel trap."

"I suppose so," I said. "They can get them."

"And from that," said Pasc, "I got him to talk about the company — about you and the Hoodlum Company."

"What'd he say?"

"He said there was nothing to say, except they were going to smash you."

"Smash nothing!" said I, and I laughed at him. "Pasc," I said, "you're easy. You always were. What do you know about business fights?"

"Not much, maybe," he said, "I know. But I could see this. He showed it to me — perfectly plain. They've got you, Bill. This thing is going against you."

"Going against me? How do you know — or they?"

"They've got their ways," he said. "They know."

"Well, I suppose they have. I'll admit that much; everybody says so anyhow," said I, thinking for a minute how big these fellows were, and the wires they had out everywhere. "They certainly can buy the very best legal advice in the country."

"It's more than that," said Pasc.

"More?"

"The courts will go against you," said Pasc.

"How do they know that?"

"Oh, they know!" said Pasc.

"Maybe they do, and maybe they don't," said I.

"And anyhow," he went on, "they've got to — the courts — decide against you, as far as I can see; from what he said — just from the law of it. What did your lawyer tell you — anything different? Did he want to go on? Did he say you had a first-class case?"

"Never mind what he said now," I answered him, getting a little huffy. "You tell me what they're going to do."

"He didn't encourage you — your lawyer — I can see that now!" said Pasc, looking at me for a minute or so before he started on talking. "And what they're going to do is just do nothing. Just tie you up indefinitely legally. All they got to do is tie you up, and sit still. He laughed about you, Bill," he said, "to tell the truth. He said at first you were just a hot-headed fool that was trying to hold them up — from out here in the country."

"Hold them up!" I said, and cursed them out.

"I told him better than that," said Pasc. "But it took me some time to convince him."

"What did he claim he'd do to me — did he say?"

"Nothing," he said. "They were through with you. He laughed about your claim you could hold back Billings from selling his stock to them on account of what his bank did. He said they had the control of the company without you — that was all — with Billings, and the rest. The worst that could happen to them, they would have a majority of the stock over you."

"I could give them quite a fight," I said, "even as a minority stockholder."

"You wouldn't be that, even, as he puts it."

"Why not?"

"Because — however it comes out finally — they're going to fight you everywhere, through all the courts, up and down hill, for that stock of yours. They're going to fight you to a finish."

"All right," said, "let them."

But it made quite a dent in me, just the same, thinking of what I might be up against.

"And in the meanwhile, they'll have that stock of yours tied up solid in the court, so you can't control it."

"We'll see about that, too," I said.

And we stopped awhile.

"They're big people," said Pasc, finally.

"Yes, I know that," said I. "But this is a free country, too."

"That's true enough," he told me. "But there's a great difference in the power people have here — we all know that."

"I suppose we do," said I, and we sat thinking again.

"And there's another thing," said Pasc; "in a way there's more than just your stock in this thing to Magnus and Company."

"What?"

"I think they mean to punish you — in a way — for not keeping your agreement. Tie you up — cut off your income from the stock; damage you every way they can. Punish you. He didn't say so exactly. He said they were going after you — for the principle of the thing — as an object lesson."

"They'll go after me all right; they'll punish me — if Billings can make them."

"They've got you bad," said Pasc. "They'll have a kind of foul hold on you. Your salary will be gone, your principal property tied up in the courts, and you'll be fighting about the biggest power in the country. When I saw just what was coming," said Pasc, "it scared me."

And I didn't say anything. I looked down, feeling ugly.

"So I asked him," he went on, finally, "to hold off, and I'd see you. I got him to hold off and give me a chance to see you, and offer you that million dollars again for the last time!"

"No job in Detroit, I suppose, now."

"No, they withdraw that."

"They do, huh?" said I, and stopped.

"What difference does that make," said Pasc. "You wouldn't take it anyhow."

"No, I don't suppose I would," said I, and looked up at him.

"You mean to say," I said, "you turned around from where the doctor sent you, and came back here, feeling as weak as you did — for this?"

"I'd have got out of my grave," he said, "and come. If I couldn't come any other way."

I didn't say anything back, but it made more of an impression on me, just that — his coming back and the way he looked — than anything that had been said or done to me before.

"You oughtn't to have done it," I said.

"Oh, that's nothing."

"Cripes," I said to myself, watching him — how sick and tired he looked; "that fellow must have convinced you, all right!"

It made me stop and hesitate in the thing for the first time.

But I wouldn't say so to him.

"Well, Pasc," I told him after awhile, "I'm much obliged, but I'm sorry you did it."

And he didn't say anything.

"Why didn't you cable?" I said.

"Because that wouldn't accomplish what I was after."

"It won't make any difference, I'm afraid," I said, "in the outcome."

"Yes, it will, too," said Pasc. "I'm going to get what I came for."

"You ought to know me better than that," I told him.

"I know you," he said.

"You ought to know that when I say I'll fight, I'll fight."

"I do. I know you," he went on. "And I know you're no fool, too. I knew that when I started back. I knew you were bound to fight — if you once got started, till somebody showed you. And I knew if any one could talk sense to you, I could. So I came."

"You took a good deal on yourself," I started to say. And then I didn't. The look on his face prevented me.

"Now you're going to sign with these folks," he said, "while you can, and get out. Take your money and stop — the way you ought to."

"Who says so," said I.

"I do," he said, very quiet. "I do. Because I'm right, and what's more," he said, watching me, "you know it, too. Don't try to say you don't. Because you do. You know it's time for you to quit.

"Everybody's told you. Your wife has told you. Your doctor has told you. Your lawyer's told you. And now I come back from across the pond," he said, and gave me this long, serious look, "and I tell you the same thing. It's time for you to quit — aside from this entirely. Before you make my mistake," he said. "Before you stay *too late*. I've got a right to warn you," he said, fixing those old ghostly eyes of his on me —"more ways than one!"

And I stopped then. I didn't answer then. I saw something in those old blue eyes of his that scared me, for the minute. I saw what he really thought — about himself!

But he only waited for a few seconds, looking at me.

"You ain't strong enough to fight those fellows," he said. "Not now. You're a sick man, really."

"Oh, rats," I told him.

"But if you were four times as strong, it wouldn't do you any good. They got you wrong, in the first place, just because you were such a fighter, naturally. They've got your name on a paper, and now you're trying to withdraw it. But the main thing is, that now they've got you! All they've got to do is sit still, and tie you up, and let you bang yourself to pieces. You can't hurt them. You can tear and rear, but that's all you can do. You can bite and snarl. But it's no use. No more use — you'll make no more impression on these people, Bill — than a bulldog biting a mountain!"

I grinned a little then, finally, watching him, sitting there, saying that with a serious face. I grinned, and he saw me.

"I tell you what I want you to do, Bill," he said to me then. He knew in a minute, of course, what it meant to get me grinning.

"What?" I said, still smiling. I couldn't help myself.

"I want you to go to your lawyer with me, tomorrow morning, and see if he don't say so — just exactly what I tell you. Will you do it?" said Pasc."

"Well, yes," I said after awhile. "I guess maybe I will."

"And will you do what he tells you to?"

"Yes," I said, thinking. "Yes, I'll do that too."

And I knew when I said it what my lawyer would tell me. He'd told it to me already, as far as I would listen to it. That meant practically that I was through. But I wasn't going to show it to Pasc then.

"But there's nobody else in the world would have got that much out of me," I said, "but you!"

"That's what I came back again for," said Pasc.

"Cripes," I said to myself, with a kind of a start, watching his lean face and thin temples. "All I hope is you didn't kill yourself doing it!"

CHAPTER XXVI

MEMORIES

"How do you like my library now?" I said to Pasc, finally, after we'd sat there thinking. I had got me two or three new things since he'd been gone. He sat there in front of the fireplace, and looked around.

"Fine," he said.

I had it fixed up pretty near to suit me now. I'd just got this big new oil painting down in New York — of some girls in swimming, a corker! And that big elk's head over the fireplace, with those little electric lights in its eyes — that novelty I put in to surprise callers with, and make some amusement.

"It's good!" said Pasc.

"I think so myself," said I.

We sat around then, after that, quite a little while, visiting.

"You're a funny one, Bill," said old Pasc, going back to that deal again. "You have to fight just so much anyhow. It's ridiculous — all of us standing around you,— your wife and your doctor and your lawyer; all begging you for Misery's sake to take a million dollars and enjoy it, and not kill yourself. And these other fellows getting mad and trying to ram it down your throat. It is ridiculous, now, ain't it?"

"We'd have thought so," I said, "five years ago. I can see you now," I said, "I God, I have to laugh. I can see just the way you looked when you first stepped in that old office door in that butternut-colored overcoat."

And then we grinned — and shut up for a minute.

"Did you keep it, Pasc?" I asked him. "That coat? Oh, you ought to have kept it — and have it stuffed. Put up somewhere as a monument."

"Or a warning," said Pasc.

"I wish I was back, quite often," I said, "just you and I, starting there over again!"

"So do I," said Pasc.

"I guess we're that way, some, both of us. I guess most of us are who were raised in a machine shop. We all like to be our own boss, puttering around in our own place. We're too independent. That was one trouble with me in this thing."

"I suppose so," said Pasc, and stopped thinking.

"It was our baby, Pasc," I said to him for the thousandth time. "We raised it — from nothing."

"Yes," he said, staring into the fireplace.

And after that awhile, he started and asked me about everybody in the shop, including old Tom Powers and his wife.

"How's the old Miracle getting on for him?" Pasc asked me.

"He's still puttering around on it," I said. "Watching nights, and pecking away with his left hand on the thing — discovering perpetual motion. It's funny, ain't it?"

"Yes, it is," said Pasc, looking off, remembering.

"And he won't take a dollar from anybody. I've tried him several times."

"I know you have."

"He's proud; the old man's proud," I said. "He'll work till his last gasp — fooling with that old contraption, to keep his mind busy on the side."

"He ain't suffering for anything!" said Pasc.

"No," I said, "I'd see to that, anyhow. But I'm sorry for the old man, Pasc, especially since that thing — the boy! I wouldn't say so," I said. "But I will now. I always felt a little responsible for that thing."

And when I said it, I saw I hadn't ought to. I saw his hand go up to his head — thinking of it again.

"Responsible — no," he said. "It wasn't anybody's fault, I guess," he said, kind of slow. "It happened, that's all; because it had to! The way things do. We're all to blame — some!"

And I changed the subject, and got back, talking of old times, when we started.

"The fact was, I suppose, we got in it just about right, when we did," I said. "We struck it rich."

"Better than gold and rubies and precious stones."

"Yes."

"Yes," said Pasc, nodding his old head, "we had that right at first — that's where the gold mines are today. That's the thing they've got to have — everybody."

"What's that?" I asked him.

"Speed. That's where the money is now. Look at it — in telegraphs, telephones, bicycles, railroads, automobiles. In them, or the stuff to build them! Speed," he said. "There's where the money's been for fifty years: saving people's time; crosscuts! The American people have got to hurry."

"By and by," I said, "if they don't look out, they may get going too fast, some of them!"

And he grinned — that sudden disappearing grin — and went on again.

"They're getting up into the air now," he said. "The next things are flying machines. We're going to see great changes in the next ten years. We're going off of wheels, up in the air!"

"Hitting her up two hundred miles an hour, I suppose."

"Easy," he said. "I'm working on that some, now."

And he dug out his pencil and old envelope again — and started to draw me a diagram of what he was doing now on a carburetor; and a counterbalancing idea to keep those aeroplane engines from heating up, and keep them from grinding themselves to pieces.

"There'll be a barrel of money in that some day," I said, "maybe — for somebody!"

"There will, probably," he said.

"It's a darn funny thing, ain't it," I said, "when you think of it, how money's made."

"It is," said Pasc.

"Two fellows like you and me," I said, "get a hold of one of these Miracles that old Tom talks

about — and grab on to it. And it pulls them along up with it."

"As long as they hang on," said Pasc.

"And the fellow that hangs on longest, and has it last, gets the most," I said. "And that ain't fair, either, generally. Look at you and me. You got up this thing — and I get my half from you. And you get a third of a million and I get a million!"

And then I stopped. And he grinned, and I grinned, when I realized what I'd said. We both knew that what I would do was settled — now!

"Whatever I do — fight or sell," I said, correcting myself. "I get more than you. And that ain't exactly fair."

"Oh, I don't know," said Pasc. "Money isn't given out that way, as awards of merit exactly. It can't be. Who'd give it?"

"But it ain't distributed right, just the same. You know that, and I know it. We earned our money. You can't say anything against that. The man who gets up a thing like this," I said, "and the man who stands by and jams her through don't get anything more than is coming to him."

"What about the fellow working on it, nine hours a day in the shop. The way you and I were, you might say, both of us, before this?" he asked me.

"They get all that's coming to them."

"I don't know!"

"You ain't getting to be one of these socialists?" I asked him.

"No. I don't know as I am," said Pasc.

"Well, I'm not," I told him. "And I don't take any stock in them. I never knew one yet that would do a full day's work in his life. They're the talkers, not the workers," I said. "I can go right down to any machine shop and pick out the socialists by the amount of work they do — or they don't do, you'd better say. They're the talkers — not the workers!"

"Maybe they might do us some good," said Pasc. "Talking us into doing something different."

"You don't believe in that stuff, do you?" I asked him again.

"No," he answered me. "I don't know as I do. I just think they might be something different — some way."

"Maybe," I said. "But the thing that makes me mad is these damned still-faced dudes in the bank we've been talking about; these fellows that have got control of all the money there is, here and down on Wall Street.

"You puff and grunt, and break your back, and sweat blood, and get a thing just about up and tottering on its legs, the way we did — and they come along and reach out their lily hand, as the fellow says, and take it away from you! Look you in the face, with that damned mean expressionless look, and walk off with it, as if they were entitled to it. Some time or other — sooner or later, they'll grab it away from you! If it isn't here at home — if it gets big enough, it'll be one of those fellows that runs one of these million-dollar machines on Wall Street.

"What kind of a fellow was this," I asked him,

breaking out, "that you saw on the steamer — that had charge of the Universal Motors for Magnus and Company. He's never come to see me — only has heard agents, once or twice. Billings even hasn't got to him a great many times."

"Oh, he's the same kind as Billings is in a way — but smarter looking with smarter eyes," said Past.

"All dressed up like Sunday evening — all the time, I suppose. And manners like an actor walking out in the afternoon. And a face you could crack nuts on."

"Not quite so bad," said Past, grinning.

"And back of him," said I, "as I understand it — are the old crooks like old Magnus was, and Braneman and old Backus, with faces stiller than a mummy; and brains in back going thirty-five hundred revolutions a minute, thinking what they can pick up and carry off out of the country next. Those old devils sitting in back there that nobody ever sees.

"I God," I said. "They're the boys we're all working for, when it comes down to the facts in the case. All of us, all over the country. I've watched that game, what I could. I've always wondered, more or less, about these ten million and hundred million and five-hundred-million boys down in Wall Street, waiting, waiting for everything to drift in there. I never understood it quite. All I know, and everybody else does, is they've got it all fixed right for themselves.

"Is it all crooked, do you think, or does it just have to be? Do any one set of men have to have so

much power? What do you think? Or did you ever think about it?"

"He explained it to me," said Pasc, "a little — on the steamer, that partner. It sounds all natural as water running down hill."

"To hear him tell it," I said.

"It's just like Billings' bank in a way — here in town. They've got the money."

"So I might get control of all the water in the county," I said. "But that wouldn't make it right."

"They've got the money; and sooner or later business things drift into them. They've got to — from all over."

"We know that," I said. "Ourselves, from experience. Right here. Never once from the time we started has the finger of somebody with money been off us."

"And especially as things like ours get bigger," said Pasc, "and grow faster — they're always fewer to get the money from. Especially when they get up to a certain size. Then they have to all drift into one place."

"New York?"

"Yes," said Pasc, "yes. And he explained that to me — just the same as the other. That's the only place they can go. The only place with money enough. They've got to, sooner or later, come in there."

"And they sit there," I said, "with their faces still and their eyes still and their hands still, till it gets just right. And then — Zip — they grab it!"

"Yes," said Pasc.

"For they've got the only million-dollar machine in the country."

"Stock machine," said Pasc. "Stock factory, I should call it."

"Maybe," I said. "But it all comes to the same thing. It's money they turn out of it finally — for themselves."

"Yes, it all comes to that finally," said Pasc, thinking. "Has to. He admitted that."

"And they keep their eyes out too, watching." I said, "all the time. Don't forget that!"

"They have fellows like Billings, of course," said Pasc, "all over the country, who know them in the banking business. And they have to come to them, when they get anything big in their own neighborhood."

"Sure," I came back. "Just as I always said. They've got their wires out, and their spies — watching, watching, watching, all over the country — feeling of everything that comes up."

"It is a regular machine — little wheels and big wheels, all meshed in together," said Pasc. "That's what I always thought about it. All running along in oil."

"That's just what it is," said I, "a regular machine — a million-dollar machine, run to turn out hundreds of millions, like Proctor Billings would a hundred thousand. A billion machine, more likely — a billion machine," I said, "with its little cogs and big cogs turning day and night all over the country, coining money on the quiet, out of what we all do.

"We've got about as much show against it," I said; "you and I in the end, as a fly holding up a steam roller."

"Just about," said Pasc.

"I God," I said. "There's nothing in the world I'd like so much as a peep in the inside of how they work that big money machine of theirs down there in Wall Street.

"To tell you the truth," I said, "what I never said to any other man in my life. I'm afraid of it! And I guess I'm not the only one either."

"You're not," said Pasc. "Everybody is, I guess, more or less."

And after that we quit and went to bed. I could see Pasc was getting tired.

"Don't he look dreadful to you?" said Polly, after we got upstairs. "Those eyes!"

"There's nothing else to him," said I. "It reminds me of what we thought when we were boys in the country sometimes — an old pair of eyes, with nothing in back of them, wandering around a graveyard in the dark."

"That's not what he reminds me of, exactly," said Polly. "He reminds me always of a man possessed. With a spirit in him destroying him — like the man in the Bible."

"Yes," I said, "that's right, too. He does me, tearing him, wearing him out!"

CHAPTER XXVII

SUNDAY AFTERNOON

We saw them back to the train — Polly and I — about a week after that, when Pasc had got what he came after — and I'd agreed to sign up finally. Polly and I sat there going home, each one in our own corner of the limousine.

"You want to remember one thing, Bill," said Polly, putting her hand on my arm, kind of softly, after we'd got nearly home. "You mustn't be surprised if you hear bad news some time from Pasc."

And I looked at her.

"He's a pretty sick man, I'm afraid," she said. "We've got to get prepared for most anything."

And I didn't say anything for a minute.

"All I hope is," I said finally, "that coming over here hasn't made him worse. I hope I won't be responsible for anything!"

"You don't want to get that idea on your mind," said Polly. "That's the thing Zetta has now all the time, and can't get rid of — about herself."

"That's so, I suppose," I said.

"I sometimes think we ain't any of us responsible for anything," said Polly.

"We ain't — much, either," said I, thinking.

"Zetta is changed, isn't she?" I said after awhile.

"Yes," said Polly. "Scarcely a loud laugh out of her while she was here."

"You can't blame her."

"There never was a day in her life," said Polly, "she didn't worship the ground he walked on."

"I suppose not," said I.

And I sat back, thinking of Pasc and the days we started out and worked together.

I thought of him again that next day — Sunday afternoon, it was — when I went into the factory office to pick up and clear out my desk. We weren't going to clean up the business and make the final transfers till Tuesday. But it was as good as done, and I thought I'd go in and get through and get out again, when I had the place to myself, and there wasn't anybody else there to watch me.

I went over about three o'clock — after dinner. And left the car in back, and went in the back way through the factory. It was cold in there. They'd let the fire go down over Sunday; and the place seemed extra still and lonesome, coming in — as a factory always does Sundays, anyhow. All those big heavy machines that make so much crash and jangle week days standing still, and all the men gone. Nothing left. Just the big vacant white-washed place, all sprawled full of stuff — pulleys and belts and levers, dark where the soiled hands of the workmen had been. All standing still and idle — waiting!

Most of the machines, of course, were new. But some of them, I could see, were the original old ma-

chines we started with in the old place. I stopped and took hold of one and worked the lever.

Then I went along. It was in March — pretty cold still. It wasn't any too warm in the office.

I hustled around then, getting everything out as fast as I could. I didn't want to stay around there much now I was going. I wanted to get out and get through. I always did kind of hate to move out of anywhere — for the last time.

I shoved everything into a couple of bags finally, and looked around to see if there was anything else I'd overlooked. I stood there and looked around — and it struck me: "This is the last time, I'll ever be here — probably!"

It gave me a kind of a twist. I don't deny it. It would, I guess, to anybody, going out that way — leaving a business you'd built up the way I did. The way Pasc and I built up that one.

"Well, after all," I said, "you ain't like a man that's going to be hung!" And I clapped on my hat and started.

But I couldn't help thinking when I started out, again: "It's the last time! And it's not only the last time for you, but in two months more there won't be any factory here at all. It will be all out in Detroit — all gone! All vanished, as if it never was in existence.

"Let's get out of this!" I said. And I took up my two bags, and started out back again.

The sun was getting pretty well down now. It looked empty as the devil out there. The still old crooked shadows of the machinery lay tangled up

against the whitewashed walls — marked out by the late pinkish March sunset shining in the windows opposite.

I went along, getting out as fast as I could, when who should come out from one of the tin doors in the fire wall but old Tom Powers, poking around, looking out for the place.

"Why, hello, Tom!" I said, and dropped my grips. It seemed good and natural to see him again.

"I didn't know but what I had a burglar here," he said, and grinned — that little old wrinkled deaths-head smile of his.

"I will be after this week," I said. "They'll arrest me if they find me in here."

"You're getting through," said Tom, "as boss. So I hear. Well, I'm sorry to hear it."

"I'm sorry, too," I said. "When you've been hitched up to a thing the way I have been to this, Tom, it comes kind of hard giving it up."

"It does," said Tom.

"But it can't be helped," I said. "It might be a lot worse."

"It might," said Tom, peering at me with his little eyes. "And Mr. Thomas. Where is he now?"

"Gone abroad again. He ain't very well."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Tom. "He was a good man."

"Well, we can't have everything," I said.

"No," he said. "It might be worse. You're both rich men, so I hear. It's made you both rich — the old Hoodlum."

"Yep," I said, "Tom. We two cashed in on our Miracle. It's your turn next. What about you?" I asked him. "Did Mr. Billings fix you up — get you a new job, when they moved the plant out to Detroit."

"Yes, I'm going to stay here for a while anyhow, watching this place for him — while they empty it out. And I guess right along after."

"He told me he'd look out for you," I said.

"He treated me all right," said Tom.

"Look here," I said to him. The old man looked pretty wabbly to me. "Don't you think yet you've got enough of being night watchman?"

"No, I don't know as I've had," he said, looking up at me. "What else would I do? Besides, it gives me a place to work on my invention, odd times, I wouldn't get anywhere else. The boys always leave me their tools — or they have."

"You won't have them now."

"No. But I'll get along."

"How is she now?" I said, smiling. "How is the old Miracle?"

"She's all right," he said, smiling back, like a good-natured old mummy.

"Still the coming thing?" I asked him.

"Just as I always said," he answered me. "Did you see," he asked me, that old kind of eager, inventor's look coming back into his eyes —"did you see how they're flying abroad now — hundreds of miles in those aryplanes — the Wright boys and them they sold them to. Flying in the air better and better all the time — thousands of them!

What do you think of that? What did you think of it ten years ago?

"They're flying in the air all over," he said, his eyes getting brighter and brighter. "Is it any funnier for you and me, then," he asked me, "to get the power out of the air, than for them to be flying around in it?"

"No, I guess not," I said. It seemed to me the old man got a little looser and queerer every year on that thing of his. Why wouldn't he, working away at it with that old left hand of his, night after night, in that old dark lonesome factory?

"Don't you ever get sick of it," I said, "walking around here at night?"

"No," he said. "I got something all the time to occupy my mind."

"That's more than I'll have now," I said. "But I'll tell you what I'll do," I told him. "What I'm looking forward to now," said I, taking up that old joke of ours together. "When you get around to it, I'll just about take up that option of ten thousand shares of stock in the old Miracle. That's a million dollar's worth.

"Or — I tell you what I *will* do," I said, getting serious. "I'll put in ten thousand dollars right now, on account. I'll back you to that extent, whenever you want to get through here — and take me up!"

"You're a damned good man, Bill Morgan," said old Tom, staring at me. "You always was. The men all liked you," he said, and stood staring at me a little while.

"But it ain't no use. You can't do that to me," he said, with a kind of crafty smile. I think he was just a little touched in the upper story now — beginning to be. "You can't do that to me. You can't make me take your money while I can earn my own. What would I do with it if I had it? Sit around the house with the old woman?"

"You could work there," said I, "on the Miracle."

"Not so well as I could here. And besides, what would I stop for — when I'm still able to support myself and get along? I'll tame my own Miracle, and harness her up — by the grace of God," he said. And laughed that cracked old laugh of his. "And some day," he said, "when I get a good thing — when I've got her worked out, under control, I'll ride her over to your place. I'll put her on wheels and ride over to see you. And you can put your money in her then!"

The sun got in back of the corner of one of the small shops across the road, and went out entirely, then; and the crooked shadows of the machinery died off the white brick wall. All at once it seemed kind of blue and chilly in there. I knew I'd got to go pretty quick, anyhow.

"All right. I'll be looking for you, riding up," I said, getting up my grips. And I went along, and left him, standing there in the aisle between the machines.

The dusk was coming in fast; the place was lonelier than Tophet. I looked back once before I shut the door. The old man still stood there where I

left him — like an old ghost in the place. Something that belonged there, and couldn't get away. He stood there, watching, till finally I shut myself out of my factory — that last time.

I never went back in there afterwards. I never wanted to.

CHAPTER XXVIII

TWO PIECES OF PAPER

"This is the day," said Polly to me, both of us waking up early.

"Yes," I said, and lay there till breakfast time, staring at the ceiling, thinking.

I was over at Billings' bank, with my lawyer at eleven o'clock, according to agreement — anxious to get my money, and get it over with; and see this man from Magnus and Company. Just one of the younger ones — but a partner just the same!

He stood back to me when I came in the door, looking at one of the pictures of the sheep on the walls of the private reception room. I couldn't tell much about him, except he was tall, and looked pretty young — with just a little grey hair in his head!

"Yes," said Billings, talking to him, giving me his back as long as possible. "They were my father's choice. He was born on a farm; he was always fond of pictures of sheep. He was an austere man on the outside — but he had quite a vein of sentiment in him, down deep. He didn't show it to many people — only to my mother and myself. But he developed quite a taste for painting in his late life — especially for these things, which reminded him of his early associations."

"They're very good," said the man from Magnus and Company.

"Yes," said Billings. "They are — I think. The old man had no education in art, of course. Or in any other way really. He was not an educated man in the narrow sense of the word. What he did was by sheer will power and mental ability."

"I have heard Mr. Magnus speak of him, before his death," said the other man, "as a man of great natural powers."

"I'm glad to know that," said Billings. "He was that, exactly — a diamond in the rough."

"Mr. Magnus was a New Englander, of course, himself," said the New Yorker.

"I know," said Billings.

And then they heard me, or pretended to, and turned around; and Billings introduced us. And we went in and sat down in Billings' private office, under his father's old picture. And I watched the two of them close, while we went through with it.

There was nothing to do much, but sign and take my money. It had all been fixed by the lawyers in advance.

"You don't want me," said my lawyer. He was kind of a rough talking, hearty kind of fellow, "any more than two tails. This is all right from our standpoint. The other people are the ones to look out. They're the buyers."

"We're perfectly satisfied," said the Magnus partner. "We don't think Mr. Morgan would cheat us." And smiled.

He had a pleasant agreeable smile on him — an

easy kind of way He was a good looking youngish fellow — not a day over forty-two or three. Tall and slim like Billings. A quiet dresser. There wasn't a diamond on him anywhere. Not even a scarfpin; but his clothes showed the money all right — made him look young, the way those New York clothes do. He was kept up every way, you could see that, like a fine race horse.

"So this is the kind that runs us," I thought to myself — keeping my eye on him, watching just what he did.

He had this easy way with him, and all the time in the world apparently. The thing he was up to didn't worry him at all — a million more or less. He was willing to talk about anything, from business to Billings's flowers.

I talked with him myself quite a little, while they were getting some of the papers together outside. We got to talking about our line of business.

"In some ways," he said to me, "I've always thought your line was the biggest thing in the country; your manufacturing sections like this, and the people that grow up in them — and these different machine shops, real expert machinists, I mean, now.

"They speak of farmers," he told me, "as the foundation of everything in this country — from the beginning. But in a way these people — these machinists — are more American than they are. More thinkers — more outspoken and independent."

"I God, yes," I said. "That's the trouble with us, I guess. Too much outspoken."

And he laughed.

And Proctor Billings, who was listening, smiled a kind of frosty smile — all below the nose.

"But a good workman," I said, "we always say, is apt to be crochety."

"I believe you," he said. "Men have got to be more or less that do their own thinking — have to, in their own business, day after day."

"Too much thinking makes a man cross, anyway," said I.

The Magnus partner laughed again.

"I believe you," he said.

"You thought I was crooked," said I, looking at him. "Didn't you? You thought I was holding you up."

"That's putting it a little bluntly," he answered me.

"Put it any way you want to. You thought so! But I wasn't. All it was, when it came down to giving up my business, and not being my own man — I found I couldn't make up my mind to do it. I've wanted to be independent always. I guess it's in our blood — us fellows raised in a machine shop, the way I was."

"I think you may be right," he said.

"I know I am. The truth is," I told him, "I'd be fighting you now — in spite of my wife and my doctor and my lawyer — if my old partner and the best friend I ever had hadn't come back from Europe and shown me I was making a fool of myself.

"And I don't know now but he killed himself doing it!" I said — and stopped.

"Mr. Thomas, you mean," said he.

"Yes," I said. "The best fellow that ever lived."

"He seemed a very unusual man," he said. "What little I saw of him."

"You bet he is," said I. "And the straightest haired man in this world."

And then we got talking about Pasc and the Hoodlum. And I told him how Pasc had drawn the whole machine, you might say, out of his head; about his envelope and stub, and his bench in the shop; and his absent-minded eyes, and his never resting or being satisfied until he had a thing perfect.

"I don't know as you have ever seen men down your way just like him," I said. "Those old-time workmen — old-fashioned machinists! Those bony sober-faced fellows in overalls."

He nodded his head. "I've seen them," he said, thinking, "those faces. When I was a boy. I knew one man, in particular. . . . You see them now, sometimes," he said, "staring out the door of a garage — with those eyes!"

"And a smudge on the end of their nose."

"Yes," he said, and laughed.

"They are the salt of the earth," I said. "They keep this country going on, as you say, more than anybody."

"You're right," he said. "That's just what they do. I believe it," he said. "In a great many ways, these men with the metal gauges in their hands have changed the face of the world more than the man with the hoe and the axe, that found and broke in

our continents. And they are going to still more. They'll be our chief pioneers from now on."

"How?" Billings asked him, coming into the talk.

"In the air, for instance," he explained to him. "Pioneers, not in continents — in unknown things — big forces."

"I get you," I said. "Working with them, day after day; fighting them, off in the air somewhere! That's what happened to Pasc. He got hold of something out there too big for him. It wore him out."

And the talk stopped a minute.

"If the truth was told," I said, starting it up again, "I did the same thing in my way. I got hold of something that was too big for me. And now I have got to drop it myself."

"It is pretty big, for anybody," said the Magnus man —"a sudden new industry, like this."

"It doesn't seem too big for you people," I said to him. "You people with the money and the banks. Or anything else! You take them all as they come."

"All we can do really is what you did in another way," he said; "watch a thing and direct it and keep it going."

"Ah-ha," I said, listening to him explain it through. "But that ain't my theory of it exactly."

"What is?" said he.

"My theory is," I told him, "that you've got the biggest machine of all. You've got the money machine — the billion machine, that all this other ma-

chinery works for, finally." And I told him a little about the way Pasc Thomas and I used to discuss it.

He laughed again.

"I never heard it put just that way before," he said.

"It takes a machinist to catch a machinist," said Proctor Billings, loosening up a little now.

"Yes," said the other man.

"I never saw very far into it," I said. "It was always a mystery to me — your machine and how it worked, and the control you've got over everything. I'd rather know about it now than anything I can think of."

"Come on down some time," said the Magnus man, smiling. "And I'll try to show it to you — what I know about it. It's a considerable mystery to me," he said, "while we're starting telling the truth. I'm always working, trying to learn it, like your friend with the motor."

And then they brought in the last papers finally. And he cast his eyes over them for a minute or two, while I watched him.

He was easy — but you could see, when his face went still, he was the same thing as Proctor Billings — the same still-faced tribe, when you got down underneath. All the look of knowing something you didn't and holding it back on you; putting everything up to you all the time; and watching you, to grab you when you went wrong. I watched those two — Billings and him — talking to one another back of those masks — those bankers' faces; their own kind of talk. This New Yorker was too much for him;

his mind went leading Billings' mind around all the time like a dog on a rope.

"What's this?" said the Magnus partner, pointing out something in the agreement to Billings.

"Oh! I don't see how that happened," said Billings. You could see he was flustered in spite of himself. "My mistake," he said, "I'll have it corrected at once."

"It would be better, I think," said the man from New York — kind of low and polite.

That was all he said. But it did my heart good. He was giving Billings a call-down — a punishment. Not a voice, nor an eyebrow lifted. But you could hear it coming down as plain as an Italian woman spanking a baby. You could see how deathly afraid of him Proctor Billings was.

"Cripes, what power he must have!" I said to myself, watching him — what showed through that still face of his. But never able, of course, to see back of that man's mask — all quiet and still and polite! He was too much for me; I had to acknowledge it to myself — sitting there waiting for my check.

That was the thing really now — my check; my million, they were going to give me now. I'd been thinking of it, naturally, all the time those days before that — going over everything. What it would have meant to me five years before; all the fight we had; what had happened. Now, here I was getting it!

He just reached his hand into his pocketbook, when the time came, and took out this big check —

this white piece of paper — and handed it to me — I had to laugh almost — about like passing you a cigar.

"It makes no more impression on them than that," I said to myself. "They have to hand out these millions so often — these fellows — they get awful tired of it!"

"Certified," he said. "From Magnus and Company."

I grinned; I had to. "That ought to be safe," I said; "what do you think about it?"

"Hadn't it?" he said — and laughed that quick laugh of his, showing his teeth.

"One million and sixty-five thousand, three hundred and seventeen dollars and thirty-seven cents," I said reading.

"With some minor adjustments!"

"I God," I said. "I think you're cheating me. I made it out thirty-eight cents myself."

And we laughed again, and I got up and put it in my pocket.

"I'm going to take it home," I said, "and show it to the wife. And then I'm going to bring it back here for Billings to take care of for me — for a minute or two. Then I'm coming down to buy you folks out."

"Come on. Do," he said — and held out his long hand, smiling. "We need energetic men down there."

"Well," I said, "give my regards to all the rest of the boys down there. And especially young Magnus!"

"I'll do that, too," he said.

"So long," I said. "Good-by."

Whatever he was, or whatever he could do to Billings, to the banks, or the railroads, or the country in general, I wasn't going to let him see I thought he was any different from any other man.

"Good-by," he said, and leaned over forward and shook hands with me, as if he was shaking hands with the King of England. And stood smiling at me as I went out.

When I reached the door, I caught one last glimpse of him — turning around. His smile stopped, and his still mask fell down again like the outside curtain at the ending of a play. I drove straight home. When I got there, Polly was out on the piazza — by the porte-cochère.

"Here it is," I said, coming up — taking it out, and waving it at her. "One million dollars! And a little over for a hat," I said, kissing her.

"That's fine," she said, taking me by the coat lapels. I thought then there was something, from the way she looked!

"That's fine. Come on into the house."

As we were going in, I noticed that other paper — that yellow one — in her hand.

"I've got some news for you, Bill," she said, standing inside the hall. "Not quite so good."

"What is it?"

"Pasc Thomas."

"Dead!" said I — all at once turned hoarse.

And she bowed her head down.

"Oh, Bill," she said, grabbing me like a child in

the dark. "I'm — I'm so thankful it wasn't you!"

And she started crying a little.

"Pase Thomas!" I said, looking off over her head. My lips were kind of numb.

We stood there quite awhile, then I looked down — happened to. Those two pieces of paper — the white one and the yellow one — had fallen from our hands and lay there together on the floor.

"I tell you what I'd do," said Polly, that next week after that — always planning and always looking out for me. More than ever now!

"What?" said I.

"Look," she said. "It isn't everybody that makes a million. Now why don't you, while you're resting, and it's all fresh in your memory, get ahold of some of these newspaper boys you know, and dictate what you remember, and have them fix it up into a story for you."

"That's not so bad!" said I. My digestion was better; the doctor said I was doing pretty well. But I did hate to sit around so. How I did miss my little old business! "That's not a bad idea," I told her.

"No, is it?" she said. "It would occupy your mind — keep you from sitting around smoking too much — get you interested in something before we go off traveling."

"It might at that," said I, thinking.

"A good plain story, in good plain language, for ordinary plain-spoken people like us to read. And I've got a name for it!" she said.

"What's that?"

"You know all those biographies they get out. About different men? All the things they've done, and are responsible for? Well, I'd have this different from that."

"How?"

"I'd call it the biography of a million dollars. Not just the story of a man; but the business — everything.

"You — you see?" she said, hurrying, explaining. "Make it a little different from these things you read in the biographies, or the newspapers when a rich man dies. Show how it really happened."

"I God, yes," I said, sitting up. "You'd think to read one of those things — that some of those old devils with square chin whiskers just reached out and took up a piece of mud and made the world out of it, with their own hands — alone."

"Yes — yes. That's what I meant. You try it," said Polly. "Write it."

"I will, I believe!" said I, making up my mind. So I have, in a kind of a way.

But the trouble is, I've only told about half the story — not half. I don't know about the other end — those bankers; those silent boys in the banks all over the country — heading up down there in Wall Street. They're the fellows I want somebody to tell me about — those still-faced men that run that billion-dollar machine down in Wall Street — and grab off their slice of everything that comes up in the country. They're the fellows we're all working for — if we only knew it!

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